

People of Resurrection 5: Acts 16:16-34 – The Jailer

Today we're finishing our series on 'People of the Resurrection' – journey through some of the great stories of the book of Acts. We've seen how Jesus' resurrection power has changed the lives of many, both great and normal. We've seen God at work in Peter and Paul, and also in unexpected people like Cornelius, Dorcas or Lydia. Today we finish with another dramatic story – in fact this one reads like a novel or an adventure story, doesn't it? It's got all the ingredients of a BBC1 Sunday night period drama – a fortune teller, a rowdy crowd, a couple of heroes, an extraordinary rescue, an unexpected ending. But instead of settling down at 9pm tonight with a bag of crisps on the sofa, we get to look at it in church this morning. Leaves you free to watch the live final of BGT instead.

So where are we? Last week we saw how God opened up a new beginning for Paul – he was stuck on the West coast of Turkey with nowhere left to go, and he has a dream which tells him to cross the sea to Europe. He ends up in the big Greek city of Philippi and there he meets Lydia and her family who become the first European Christians that we know about. So Paul and his friends Silas and Luke (we know it's him as all the references at this point are 'we') stay with her and start to share their faith more widely in the city. And that's where they get into trouble.... today we'll be thinking about two simple things: **the threat of the gospel, and then the power of the gospel.**

So firstly the threat – and this is something it's easy to identify with today. The work done by organisations such as Open Doors has established beyond doubt that Christians are still by far the most persecuted religious grouping in the world today. In many countries they are seen as a threat, which is weird when you think that they follow a master who teaches them to walk in peace and love, to turn the other cheek, to pay their taxes, to treat others with respect, and so on. Why are we such a threat?

The passage reminds us that it's nothing new. Go back to the gospels and it's clear we follow a persecuted Saviour. And right from the start of the church, Christians faced the same opposition: think about Peter before the Sanhedrin as early as Acts 4, or Stephen's martyrdom in Acts 7, or the great persecution spearheaded by Saul in Acts 8. Here within months or even weeks, the apostles are in trouble in a completely new city. Why are they such a threat? (Or) Who's threatened?

Firstly, the gospel is a threat to the spiritual realm. The presenting issue here is a fortune-telling slave, who makes a lot of money for her masters. It's easy to dismiss this kind of stuff as mumbo-jumbo, but the bible insists that the spiritual realm is real, that there is spiritual power which is not from God, and in fact, that all spiritual power which is not rooted in Christ is demonic, it's rooted in the devil. So this girl might only be a fortune-teller, but her power is real.

This is a timely reminder. We live today in the same sort of spiritual supermarket that existed back then. We are a nation which is hungry for the spiritual, but no longer looks for it in church. And it's good to be reminded that we need to be careful. The spiritual realm is real, so we need to acknowledge that people are looking for and finding power – but what sort of power are they connecting with? Some of it is obvious: there's the mild end of the spectrum (horoscopes, astrology) and then the more serious stuff (séances, mediums, witchcraft).

And clearly I would advise you in the strongest possible terms not to get mixed up in that, and to contact me privately if you have. But I think the bigger threat to us nowadays is the plethora of other alternative practices which have become very popular, often associated with healing power, and which we don't even think about.

I think we need to be very careful to check the spiritual roots of any alternative medicine or therapy that we want to try. Not all of it is healthy. Reiki, for example, invokes animist spirits. Even yoga, we need to check what sort of yoga it is: if it's purely the physical exercises, that's fine, but any sort of meditation and chanting (which would be part of traditional yoga) is getting mixed up with spiritual practices which it would be hard to endorse from a Christian point of view.

My dad always used to counsel that we mustn't get paranoid about this and see demons in the cornflakes, and he's right. But equally, I think a lot of Christians are sleepwalking into things which are unhealthy, even demonic, and then wonder why their faith is nose-diving, or they have no peace, or whatever. This stuff is real and we need to keep our eyes open, and rely on the power of Christ in all things.

Secondly the gospel is threat to the secular powers. Paul's actions challenged both the greed of business and the desire for a quiet life of the public authorities. Nothing much has changed there too. Why are Christians a threat? Because they serve a higher power, and all secular power hates to hear that there is a greater power than they to whom they will one day have to give an account.

I have a friend called Paul who is a missionary to the new age movement (unusual job). And he used to go to Mind Body Spirit Festivals and set up a stall offering free Christian prayer. Thousands of people go to these, you can find them all over the country. Do you know, it was usually the only free stall in the whole festival, and he always had a long queue. All the other spiritual practices cost you money, and whenever he talked about this, I thought back to Acts 16 and this story.

For 1,500 years the Christian faith has been the official religion of Europe and of Britain, in one shape or another. We've enjoyed the luxury of being allied to state power, which has not always done us any favours. But the sands are shifting. Increasingly in this generation what we believe is no longer endorsed by the state, we are having to face the fact that we may increasingly be seen as a threat in our generation. The government loves our good works, but not the beliefs that fire it. Our views on the Sabbath, on sexuality and gender, on financial probity, generosity and debt, on welcoming the refugee, and above all on Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, are going to get some of us into trouble from this point on. And we don't know which of us will be called to take a stand.

I must confess that it's something I worry about. I'm not a controversialist, I was called into ministry to try and share the love of Jesus with as many people as possible. I don't want to be known as a divisive figure – if you worry about having to defend the faith, believe me in my public role I worry about it more. But my one prayer is this: Jesus I'm not ashamed of you. If you ever call me to take a stand, give me grace to be faithful, give me grace to honour you.

The gospel – the good news of Jesus – is a threat now just as it was then. But here’s the good part. It has power as well! And briefly look with me and observe its power in three ways:

The power to change our view of circumstances. Paul and Silas have been severely beaten, but what do we find them doing late at night in jail – singing songs of praise to God! Imagine them belting out their favourite numbers, keeping everyone awake. What causes someone in that circumstance to have so much joy? The power of the gospel. Only God can work such a wonderful change in our hearts that we can face such tough circumstances with joy. And may that be true for us as well. Joy is not something we only feel when times are good. Indeed I would go so far as to say that joy is most needed precisely when things aren’t good. Joy is a supernatural outpouring of God’s grace and it’s never wrong to ask God for joy! If you remember one thing from today, let it be this – if times are hard for you, ask God and keep asking God to fill you with his joy.

Secondly, the power of the gospel to intervene in our lives. In this case, of course, an extraordinary miracle which shakes the prison. There’s two ways to look at it – sometimes we need to pray for a miracle like this, something outstanding and undeniable. But we can also look at the prison metaphorically as well. God is in the business of destroying the prisons of our lives. Often mental and emotional prisons are just as strong as physical ones, if not more so. But, as Paul writes in one of his letters later in life, our weapons of prayer and truth have divine power to demolish strongholds, by which he means in that context the other prisons of our lives. The gospel has power to set us free from whatever prisons we may face.

Finally, the power of the gospel to change a human heart. Here we finally get to the other main character in the story – the jailer, and this wonderful story of how he comes to faith. But I want us to notice what brings him to faith: it’s the lives of Paul and Silas and the power of the miracle. Have you noticed that they haven’t actually shared their faith directly with him at all yet, and yet he cries in v30: ‘What must I do to be saved?’ They only share their faith in v31 *after* he asks them that question. I think this is a real encouragement to us. I’m sure many of us feel ill-equipped to talk about faith, to *evangelise* (using the old word). But this story tells us that the most powerful factors in a journey to faith are the evidence of changed lives and God’s own personal intervention with someone. We can all live out the first and pray for the second! Yes we do need some who are good at the speaking bit, but in the end most people come to faith through seeing evidence of God at work in themselves and in others. To put it simply, they want a bit of what we’ve got.

St Francis once said: always preach the gospel and use words if you have to. Here we see the power of the gospel at work. Yes it’s a threat and we need to be realistic that our faith remains a threat. But it has *power*: to change our view of circumstances, to intervene in our lives and set us free, and to change a human heart, to see others come to faith. As we finish this series let’s renew our faith again to believe in the power of the gospel, to pray for it to change our lives and the lives of those we love. That’s why we’re encouraging everyone to pray for 5 friends this week – not too late to start. Who knows what lives will change as a result?

And may the same power we see in Acts be at work in us, in our church and our community as well. Amen.