

Father, would you come, would you pour out your Holy Spirit upon us. Reveal your written word, that we might see your living word, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Please do be seated.

So during the Eastertide, the lectionary includes readings from the Acts of the Apostles. Because we've had visiting speakers, we've not majored so much as we normally would on those readings from Acts or the Gospel According to Luke Volume Two. Unfortunately, John's Gospel gets inserted between Luke part one and Luke part two.

On Thursday, we celebrated Ascension Day and Luke sees this as the pivotal point between his two accounts. So he ends his Gospel with the Ascension and he begins Acts of the Apostles with the Ascension, with a bit more detail. I would encourage you to go back and just read both the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts. Set the scene - Jesus has spent 40 days teaching about himself in the Scriptures. He's told the disciples that they will be witnesses to what they have seen and heard, but they are to wait, wait to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, which we will celebrate next week at Pentecost.

But in our reading from Acts Chapter 16 today, we've jumped ahead many years to Paul's second missionary journey. And if we'd read a bit before the section that we read today, we would know that he was in Philippi. It was a Roman colony and a place without a significant Jewish community and without significant Jewish influence. We know this because Paul's habit when he went to a town or city was to go first to the synagogue, or first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

But he didn't go to the synagogue, probably because there wasn't one. He went outside through the city gate to the place of prayer, to the place where the small Jewish community could gather. And he taught that the longed-for Messiah of the Jews was Jesus. There he had taught, if you read the section before, he taught, amongst others, Lydia - businesswoman, who became a believer and then offers Paul and Silas hospitality, and they stay with her for a while. And then we have the account that we heard today of the slave girl following Paul around over many days as he went to the place of prayer.

I was tempted to grab somebody and say, just as I get up to preach, would you sort of heckle. But imagine Paul walking from the city to outside the city and this slave girl is shouting after them. Now, Luke describes this slave girl - in our translation, it says, 'having a spirit of divination'. It's a really poor translation. It literally says 'spirit of a python'. This divination came by the inspiration of Apollos, the python deity.

But why does Paul get annoyed? Have you ever asked yourself that question, why does Paul get annoyed? Because at first reading, it seems that this slave girl is telling the truth. What did she say? These men are the slaves of the most high God, who proclaim a way of salvation. Now, we might assume that this slave girl with the spirit of divination is referring to Yahweh, the God of Israel. But remember, as I said, this was a Gentile pagan community in Philippi, not a Jewish community. The term 'the most high God' could mean whatever you chose it to mean. It wasn't specifically referring to the God of Israel, it referred to whatever or whoever a person saw as a supreme deity. Philippi was a smorgasbord of polytheistic faith, meaning many gods and pluralistic faith, meaning many different faiths.

So as the slave girl is following Paul and Stars round saying 'these men are slaves of the most high God', people would go, 'Oh, it's that God, or it's that God, or it's the other God'. I'll give maybe one example in our modern day and some of you may be offended by this and I make no apology. But Freemasonry, for example, you have the great architect of the universe. And in their liturgy, in their meetings - my father at one point was heavily involved in Freemasonry - everything is directed to the great architect of the universe. But whatever an individual person's belief is, they can be directing that to **their** architect of the universe. It is not talking about Yahweh, Jehovah, the God of Israel. Or in the 21st century, whatever somebody worships is going to be their 'most high God'. And in this day and age, for very often with people, it's themselves that they place at the top of the pyramid, as it were. But this slave girl also says that Paul and Silas are proclaiming a way of salvation - note she doesn't say **the** way of salvation. Remember, Jesus said, I am **the** way, **the** truth, **the** life, if you want to pronounce

it differently, the way, the truth, the life, not **a** way amongst many.

Now, on Wednesday, I had the privilege of having Year Six from the primary school, and they came as detectives to find out about the Christian faith. And then teacher had emailed me and said they need to ask some questions of somebody in Christian faith. At one point they sat where the choir is sitting, they asked some of the deepest questions. Be careful letting children ask you questions, they asked questions like, 'Is Jesus still a man?' I was very pleased I'd just been doing my study for Ascension Day because the answer to that is 'yes'; 'Where is Jesus now?' And then the question 'Is it important? And how important is Jesus to the Christian faith?' And we had a discussion that you can take Buddha out of Buddhism and you can still be left with Buddhism, you can take Muhammad out of Islam and you can still be left with Islam. You **cannot** take Christ out of Christianity because our faith is founded not on a system but on a person. As somebody once said, if you take Christ out of Christian, you're left with Ian and he can't do very much for you. So no wonder Paul gets annoyed because these declarations this slave girl is making seem to be true. But if anything they are misleading in this context of polytheistic faith and pluralistic faith. Ben Witherington III puts it, 'It was not a true proclamation, merely from a dubious source.'

And Paul commands, this spirit to come out of the girl, continuing post the Ascension of work and Ministry of Jesus. And you might think that bringing liberation to someone in bondage, to a demonic spirit, would result in excited happiness for all involved. But no, as we read, there was uproar. A Bishop once said to me, I'm very concerned about my Ministry [not my Ministry, his Ministry - he was probably concerned about mine as well, but...]. But he said, wherever Paul went there was trouble and there were riots. Wherever I go they serve tea and cucumber sandwiches. What am I doing wrong? Luke - it's a bit of a play on words in the Greek - says, at the time the spirit left the girl, the hope of her owners making money left her. When the spirit left, their hope left. The slave girl's owners weren't happy about her being liberated, so much so that they bring Paul and Silas before the Magistrates in the Agora, the open forum where legal cases were heard in the centre of the town. The slave owners had status compared with Paul and Silas, who would have been seen as outsiders.

We don't know why Paul and Silas didn't claim their Roman citizenship right at the beginning, but for some reason they didn't and these slave owners would have received a favourable hearing from the Magistrates. So Paul and Silas were flogged, they're put into prison where they sing hymns, they experience an earthquake and they lead a jailer to become a follower of Jesus, just another normal day in the life of Paul and Silas. There's so much we could unpack in this account, but I want to focus just on one thing and that's the contrast between the slave girl's words and those of Paul and Silas to the jailer. The slave girl says 'these men proclaim **a** way of salvation.' Paul responds to the jailer's question, 'What must I do to be saved?', very specifically, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

Very simple point this morning, my friends. In a culture and society all around us where we see polytheistic and pluralistic faith, as Philippi observed. Society, where we see following Jesus being portrayed as just **one** way amongst many rather than **the** way to be saved, where the most high God is not specifically the Lord God Almighty, but it is whichever God people wish to see at the top of the pile - we must discover afresh the clarity of the Gospel which we proclaim. Whether it's like me and Pete who have the privilege of being up in the pulpit, or you, as you just gossip the gospel with your friends and neighbours. But like those first disciples who witnessed the Ascension, if we are to be witnesses of Jesus to those around us, we must do so after receiving the power of the Holy Spirit. So just a word of encouragement - in these days between the Ascension and when we celebrate Pentecost, be waiting expectantly, be praying to receive the Holy Spirit that we might be his witnesses within a culture and society that would say that Christianity and Jesus is just one way of faith amongst others. Amen.