

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

Acts 16:16-34

22nd April 2018

Spirit of truth and life and imagination... may we use that imagination... to live more fully... and honestly... daring the faith.. to lead us... more fully and more honestly into the world...

Today's word... or words... for your general educational wellbeing are... diacetyl tartaric acid esters of mono- and diglyceride... You may not have heard of them... you might not be able to pronounce their names... but you have probably eaten them...

If you are what you eat... then clearly we are all turning into dictionaries... because diacetyl tartaric acid esters of mono- and diglyceride... and so many other substances of similar names... have been found in our bread...

Not just any bread... but Pret-A-Manger bread... from the sandwich chain... who claimed that it is different from other shops because in their own words... their philosophy is to shun the obscure chemicals, additives and preservatives common to so much of the 'prepared' and 'fast' food on the market today...

They were found out by the the Real Bread Campaign... who discovered the chain... as so many powerful companies do... can be rather liberal in how they describe their product... thinking their power lets them get away with it... It doesn't... well... not always...

Starbucks this week... said it would close all 8,000 of its outlets... for an afternoon so it could conduct racial implicit bias workshops for all their employees... I genuinely didn't know what that meant... but looking for a definition I learned... implicit bias is the unconscious attitudes and stereotypes held by individuals around certain groups of people... ie the presumption someone is less qualified because they have a particular culture... accent... name... language etc...

This has come as the result of the arrest of two men in Philadelphia that was racially motivated... They were found out... and the power of their image... was somewhat dented by the reality of what went on in their stores... and so they had to be seen to go on a major retraining initiative... in case the power of their brand was harmed...

There is a further story today about power too... but it wasn't in the papers this week... It is the account of what happened in Philippi to Paul and Silas... who ended up in jail... following a remarkable string of stories... possibly slightly beyond the credible...

If we pay attention to how the passage works... however... we can perhaps read the various episodes together as a parable... that holds a mirror up to power... and shows us what power look like... reflecting back the truth of these other stories today... and the dynamics of power in our world...

The first episode is that of the slave girl... a foreigner... with an illness perhaps... who follows Paul and Silas around for days on end... Does it not strike you... Paul's response to her... is somewhat less than compassionate...

She's free advertising... She's following them round... telling the world everyone that they are servants of the most high God... But Paul... in an impatient fit... according to the way the story is told... exorcises the spirit... as if illustrating the divine power of his mission... but he ends up leaving the slave girl... without her gift... She is still enslaved... but now with no financial worth or value to her owners...

How quickly she is discarded... She becomes a depleted resource for her owners... She has been waved away... in some show of divine authority for Paul's mission... and he ignores her... overlooks her value as a person... a commodity to her owners and a pawn in a show of divine support by Paul... The powerful ones in the story... the owners and the missionaries... treat the powerless slave girl... with contempt... and she is forgotten...

Here's a mirror to how we treat people... You'd expect the response to the exorcism to be of wonder and awe... It's not... it is greed and bigotry... She is different... she is a foreigner... she has mental health issues... and so she becomes a legitimate target... because her value to them is nothing... not because of who she is... but because of who others see her as being...

And it isn't a huge leap from then to now... to how Syria is seen... how the Windrush Generation has been treated... it is quite a mirror the bible holds up...

But the interesting thing about the bible is it catches you out... It pulls the conceit from under you... because the powerful... can quickly become the powerless...

For next we see Paul and Silas brought before the magistrate... and end up on the other side of where the power is held... because they have caused the slave owners to lose income...

Perhaps another mirror... for that is a philosophy that is increasingly rife... when you tackle anything which is likely to lead to diminishing returns for investors... you must be wrong... Don't threaten our business regardless of how immoral... or unethical it is... How clearly that attitude reflects what has happened to environmental policies... or bonus cultures... the business is bigger than the morals...

And then... the slave owners were making their living through fortune telling... They had access to additional information... that they could use to make money from... Now how far a leap is it to find mirrored here the stories of FaceBook and Cambridge Analytica... where information about people... is power... We were left very vulnerable... and with a bad taste in our mouths... when information about our habits... was used by someone more powerful... to target folk in persuading them how to vote in elections...

But there is one line in the magistrates debate that was the clincher that sent Paul and Silas to jail... It simply says... 'because they are Jews'... You identify your enemy with a phrase that turns the crowd... in could be 'Immigrant'... 'Benefit Tourist'... 'Crooked Hilary'... 'Antisemitic'... you name someone in a particular way and suddenly all the prejudice and unspoken fear that goes with that... is locked in...

There are so many reflective surfaces in this story from Acts... as it continually reflects back to us... how power plays in our world... that is rather honest... This is just like the Bible... It is never scared to tell us about ourselves... to describe the world as the kingdom see it...

Of course... we *can* read Acts another way... as a miraculous tale... beyond how we experience the world... but leaves our behaviour unchanged...

Or we can recognise it... as a parable that exposes us to some honest truths about power and how power responds to the world...

Through this parable... Paul and Silas shift from one side of power to the other... They start by treating the slave girl as having no worth... and end up jailed because others think they have no worth...

Does that not show us... the difference between the one who oppresses... and the one who is oppressed... is less about substance... and rather more about context...

That's what Acts shows us... It depends on where you stand whether you are the one with the power or the one without... and our faith is constantly calling us to stand with those without... Where does the miracle happen?... In the place where Paul and Silas are powerless...

Perhaps the whole focus of this story is here... in the good news that God's intent... is not thwarted by the powerful of the world... The miracle happens where there is the least show of power...

So whatever power it is that devalues what God has created... whatever version of power binds up that which God loves... be it theology... politics... economy... culture... prejudice... greed... God reserves the right... God demands that it be overturned...

Perhaps through prophetic voice... or prophetic living... both of which is within the purpose of the church... We are called to live by a truth... that God believes there are other ways of dispensing power... other ways of organising our relationship with the world...

And Acts is our mirror... that reflects back how we play with power in the world... that challenges us to reaffirm and re-centre our faith and community... round that which a few weeks ago resurrection reminded us... love is not thwarted by the powerful... In fact... love comes alive in the least of places... where Paul and Silas are powerless and imprisoned... It is there... where the powerful think they have won... the miracle begins...