

Bible Tuesday for Easter 7, 2019

Acts 16:16-34

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." ¹⁸She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. ¹⁹But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." ²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

As per my notes from last week, know the "we" in the first sentence, and indication that Luke, the physician, is still traveling with Paul and writing this portion of the book of Acts from first-hand experience.

Paul and his traveling companions, including Luke, head back to the location by the riverside, where they met Lydia and her household. Paul is seemingly hounded by slave girl with the gift of divination. Paul abhors this self-appointed herald and expels the spirit of divination from the slave girl. How strange! Modern Western culture just does not think of gifts/talents/abilities as "spirits" which occupy or are expelled from individuals. However, prior to her encounter with the angered Paul, this slave made a living for her owners by telling the future. In this context, the gift of divination is understood to come from God since it not only allows the slave girl to foretell the future,

but also to recognize that Paul and company are “slaves of the most high God” and come to proclaim God’s message.

This scene leads to Paul and Silas’ arrest, but what are the charges? Being Jews and doing what everyone knows those Jews do, disturb the peace and infect loyal Romans with seditious thoughts and actions. (I keep thinking of the “trial” of the witch in “Monty Python and the Holy Grail”) There is no determination as to whether or not Paul and Silas are Roman citizens, since it is believed that no Jews could possibly be. Roman citizens cannot be capriciously flogged, as Paul and Silas are, but must have a fair trial before any punishment is meted. As it turns out, Paul is a Roman citizen, a fact that comes to play in the verses following this pericope.

There is an earthquake which shakes loose all the cell doors and shackles and chains. Why does the jailer attempt suicide? Under Roman law, the jailer’s own life is the price he pays for any escaped prisoners. Since all the gates and doors were open and all the shackles loosed, the jailer was sure he lost some of his prisoners.

“What must I do to be saved?!” -This jailer has encountered a supernatural and very alarming situation. He has two rabble rousing Jews in his jail, along with the usual, and he is jarred awake from his cot in the jail by a violent earthquake which has made escape as easy as walking away, into the night, but all the prisoners are still sitting in the places, present and accounted for. The jailer interprets this situation as a sign from the gods. He feels his wellbeing, if not his life, is threatened by two prisoners in his inmost cell. The jailer is not asking, “What must I do to get to heaven.” He is asking of Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be restored, for surely this prison break will get back to my superiors and my career, if not my life, is over. Surely the gods mean me harm with this earthquake on my jail.”

“Believe into Jesus...” Paul and Silas teach this man about a new god, the real God, the true God/Human Jesus. The man’s response is to open his heart to them with compassion and hospitality in his own home. The whole household, Roman household of spouse, children, and slaves, is baptized.

Psalm 97

The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!

²Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

³Fire goes before him, and consumes his adversaries on every side.

⁴His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles.

⁵The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth.

⁶The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory.

⁷All worshipers of images are put to shame, those who make their boast in worthless idols; all gods bow down before him.

⁸Zion hears and is glad, and the towns of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O God.

⁹For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods.

¹⁰The Lord loves those who hate evil; he guards the lives of his faithful; he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.

¹¹Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart.

¹²Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!

A psalm of acclamation. Yahweh is not only God of the Jews; God is KING of the whole earth, Jewish and Gentile lands. The “coastlands” are the lands of the Philistines. The psalmist is proclaiming that God is king of the Jews, their allies, and even their enemies.

The psalmist goes on to ascribe to God attributes usually used for deities: power over the weather, fairness (as opposed to self-interest, cronyism, etc.), creation of fire, control of volcanos, power over all creation. All creation sings God’s praise, all heavenly beings bow down before Yahweh. All peoples, no matter what ethnicity, who do what God commands walk in God’s light with joy.

Revelation 22:12-21

¹²“See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” ¹⁴Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. ¹⁵Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. ¹⁶“It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” ¹⁷The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let everyone who hears say, “Come.” And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. ¹⁸I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; ¹⁹if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

²⁰The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! ²¹The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

Here John of Patmos records the words he hears Jesus speak in the final vision he received and wrote about in Revelation.

“I am coming soon.” – John writes to Christian congregations who are having a rough time of it. Recently scholars have questioned the long held belief that the seven churches mentioned at the beginning of Revelation were actually being martyred. More likely they were being bullied, put upon, harassed, facing societal and economic hardship. Since the early Christians believed that Jesus would come again at any moment, the suffering of John’s congregations caused them to cry out, “How long, O Lord?!” Jesus replies, “I am coming soon.”

“Wash their robes” – this is a reference to the fine, clean, banquet robes that a wedding host provided to those guests who could not provide their own red carpet clothes. Earlier in Revelation, we are told that in God’s throne room are “they who have come out of the great

tribulation, who have washed their clothes and made them white in the blood of the lamb." These folks suffered greatly for their faith in Christ during the lives and now live in their eternal reward of being tended to by God and the Lamb. They may eat of the tree of life and enter into the New Jerusalem by the gates because they are welcomed there (as opposed to trying to scale the walls because they are not welcomed there).

John of Patmos's "carrot and stick" style of Christianity is very clear in this passage. If you are faithful, there is eternal reward, but if you try to misrepresent this prophecy, God should take from you as much as you edit out of the prophecy. The faithful are welcomed into the New Jerusalem but the evil doers are shunned.

John 17:20-26

²⁰"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

John is called "the gnostic gospel" for passages like this one. This is weird language for Americans. We just don't say, "I am in you and you are in them and we are all God's glory." It doesn't compute with our sensibilities. Let's break it down a bit.

What is Jesus asking of God, to which Jesus refers in the first sentence? Earlier in this Maundy Thursdays discourse, Jesus asks that God glorify him with God's own glory. Why? "So that the world may believe that you have sent me." Jesus repeats that justification twice more in the above passage. Why is it so important that the world believes that Jesus has come from God? Because in the gnostic through process, that would give Jesus credibility. Jesus is the messenger of God's word, living it out for the salvation of the world. If we don't believe Jesus came from God, then we are not going to believe Jesus' words and live by his example, thereby losing out on salvation through his death and resurrection.

Why is it so important that "they might be one"? John is the last gospel to be written. Scholars speculate that there not much unity in the Christian faith communities throughout the Roman Empire at the time of John's writing. Unity in the church would not only create strength to withstand persecution, it would also help the church to proclaim one clear gospel, something the church has never done in its 2000 year history.