

St Columba
Easter Seven: 16 May 2010

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Acts 16:16-21

It is so good to be able to share in the baptism of a new member of the Christian Church. There are lots of reasons why we can be excited by the experience.

Obviously there is the opportunity to recall our own baptism, the time when promises were made, on our behalf usually by our parents and godparents - but sometime by us ourselves. This was the time when through baptism we became members of the Christian church.

And, we recall, that membership brings with it the awareness that we belong to a community of people. It is good to know that we belong to a community of people searching, as we are amongst all sorts of questions and uncertainties, for God and what it means to be a part of the Church.

An occasion such as this in which we are participating, also brings with it - especially for those of us who are older and perhaps 'lifelong God botherers' - as Christians are sometimes called - reassurance that there is another generation of young people who will be brought up to care about creation, to care about human wellbeing and to keep the stories of our faith and hope alive.

And there is the joy of participating with the parents and wider family in the delight of a new baby, life full of potential.

These are just a few of the reasons why we can feel the privilege of sharing this occasion with you as you bring your children for baptism.

Last week we heard the story of Lydia, the wealthy business woman who traded in the luxury purple cloth. She was the first woman in Europe to be baptized - as far as we can tell through the available records. She was baptised after listening to Paul praying and telling stories about the love of God shown to us in the life and person of Jesus. She thought this was a way of life good to seek after; to try and live herself. And so she offered Paul and his travelling companions the hospitality of her home and household as a base for their first missionary journey into Europe.

Paul was a stranger to this part of the world, it was outside his cultural experience but he was well versed in the stories of Jesus and had his own experience, at a heart as well as head level, of the overwhelming love of what we Christians speak of as the love of God.

These experiences, including his dreams and visions had changed the whole course of Paul's life. He changed from a persecutor of those who followed Jesus teaching to one who took those teachings in the wider world, into what we now call Europe, and through his experience and visions was able to proclaim the inclusive nature of the healing peace that is God's gift. The change in Paul's life was so dramatic we are still talking about it today! The change for Paul in the way he understood the teaching of Jesus and who God was means that we too, all this time later can say 'yes' in baptism.

Over the period since Easter we have been considering what it means to be a follower of Jesus, a member of the resurrection community of faith, part of the baptised community. Today's story of Paul on this first of his missionary journeys offers us another clue to that.

The story is in two parts, we have only heard the first part this morning. This first part is focused on an event in the market place in Philippi, perhaps between wealthy clients of Lydia and Paul the stranger. The second part repeats the message and offers us a metaphoric reading set about with symbols and rituals of healing and liberation. I encourage you to read it for yourself in two parts.

Let me focus on the first part of the story for a moment...remember, Paul is in the market place and finds a young slave girl with a condition that means she makes strange outbursts from time to time. On close examination we see there are four factors that make her vulnerable and at the mercy of those with greater power:

- She is young – without power

- A girl – with minimal social significance

- A slave – bound to her owners

- With a physical/psycho-emotional condition

Luke, the Gospel writer and also the writer of Acts, is offering us a challenge and a model. She is being used. What is the right response – the challenge! Paul is annoyed by what he sees happening to the girl...probably outraged! He acts, the model!

So, we are told he 'heals' the girl: he chooses to act on behalf of this vulnerable child to stop the wrong doing toward her.

She becomes no longer marketable and a source of income for her owners.

We are not told what happens to the girl because that is not the point of the story - we are told instead that the owners get enraged and the whole community with them... and Paul, Timothy and Silas are imprisoned.

I am telling this story today because it points to a significant set of behaviors, actions if you like, that we, who are followers of Christ, and seeking to live out the love of God, are invited to aspire to.

In Baptism we promise, with the rest of the community of Jesus' followers, to resist evil and to raise our children to do the same.

- Evil, or wrong-doing, is often expressed in the exploitation of the vulnerable, in the imprisoning, or 'locking in' of the weak and powerless in their situation of helplessness. This is done in order that we, or others with more power, can make a gain in terms of personal power or financial profit.
- It means turning a blind eye on the misfortune of others,
- It means lacking care and concern for those in greatest need of support.

We can see these behaviors we name as wrong all around us in our society even today!

Paul set this young slave girl with the infirmity free from those who were binding her in to a life denying situation. This is the challenge to us, to those who are members of the Church, the Body of Christ. We too, like Paul and Jesus before him, must be about setting people free from those things that hold them in places of fear and exploitation...

lack of education, unhealthy living conditions, abuse, lack of love, unemployment and lack of access to speak out their needs and dreams.

When we take action against these things we are setting loose the love of God. We are offering ourselves as the hands and eyes and heart of the Christ community Paul was proclaiming and which through baptism we are members.

So parents and God parents of XXX this is what you have promised to do on behalf of these children whom you have brought for baptism this morning:

- you have promised to model for them the love of God in the way you see the world and the people we share it with,
- you have promised to model love that will not let these children or other children be exploited and bound as it were in chains that limit and contain them,
- you have promised, as members of the Christ community to care about and for the wellbeing of this earth our home and all life that it supports and with us, with the Church,
- you have promised to keep these stories of faith and hope alive so that the love of God can be experienced by those in your care.

May your life and living be blessed and your joy increased, with ours, as these little ones grow in the way of Christ that we are all seeking.