

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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SONGS IN THE NIGHT

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Psalm 43:1-5
Acts 16:16-34

Paul and Silas were flogged, which would leave them with lacerated backs, thrown into jail, and had their feet fastened in the stocks. There was no chance they would be sleeping that night. And so they sang. I wonder, would you have sung?

They had got into this situation by doing the right thing. Doing what is right is not always rewarded, and in this case it certainly wasn't. They were in Philippi still, and there they had encountered a slave girl, kept for her so-called powers of divination – which probably means that she was subject to psychotic episodes which would result in her having visions and speaking in a dreamy or ecstatic way. This poor girl followed Paul and Silas around saying "These men are followers of the Most High God who proclaim to you a way of salvation." It need not be divination which revealed this to her – it was what Paul would have told people about himself, after all. You can imagine how annoying this was to Paul and Silas as it went on day after day. It would not help their mission, it would keep people from hearing what they wanted to tell them. Apart from other considerations, the girl was using terms which people were accustomed to put their own interpretations on. The Most High God would not bring to mind the One True God, but the Greek god Zeus, head of a pantheon of lesser gods. And the way of salvation would not make people think of their eternal destination or the state of their inner souls. It would suggest prosperity and health or rescue from some sort of disaster. And so Paul turned to the girl and in the name, not of the Most High God, but of Jesus, he commanded the unclean spirit to come out of her. And she was healed.

There are not many examples in Scripture of healing being done in irritation, but this is one. And I am sure that as well as being irritated, Paul was sorry for the poor girl, prized only because of her affliction, not as a person. She was rid of her trouble and made whole; and as she was, you can imagine Lydia or one of the other new Christians saying, or thinking "Oh, I'm not sure that you should have done that." Because the girl had owners. She was still a slave, but now she was healed she was worth far less to her owners than when they had been able to charge for a session with her, for people to listen to her pronouncements. These were powerful people, who were enraged that their income was affected, so they took Paul and Silas to the local magistrate and played the race card.

So Paul and Silas ended up with lacerated backs in the stocks and locked up. They had discovered, again, what happens to those who challenge the powers of the world with the powers of Jesus. And they sang.

I wonder what they sang? We are told it was hymns to God. The Christian Church was new and were no doubt writing their own new hymns all the time, but of course much of their worship was based on the Jewish worship. In Jewish worship singing meant the Psalms. There are plenty of psalms which call on God to help to get the singer out of trouble. *“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord hear my voice!”* so begins Psalm 130. Or they might have begun with *“Vindicate me, O God and defend my cause against an ungodly people:”* Which is Psalm 43. Or there is *“Save me, O God, by your name, and vindicate me by your might.”* Which is Psalm 54. It’s a fine game to play sometime, to take the book of Psalms and go through them looking for those which you think Paul and Silas might have felt like singing when they are aching and bleeding and locked up in the dark.

But the thing about these Psalms, nearly all of them, is that if they begin in despair, or in petition for God to help, they end in praise. *“I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good.”* is almost the conclusion of Psalm 54. *“O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love”* is the conclusion of Psalm 130. *“Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God”* is how Psalm 43 ends. They begin in the dark places of reality but by addressing God, by bringing their reality to God they are lifted beyond the current situation into God’s presence and God’s reality. And this is even more true when they are sung. “He who sings, prays twice” is a saying I once came across and it is true. When we sing to God we pray the words of our song, but the music also does something to our spirits, and we know God’s presence and God’s reality in a different way.

The power of music to lift us has long been known. Why else is there a very ancient tradition of armies and fighting forces having musicians – a pipe band, a lone piper, a bugler or some other form of musical mood-raiser? During the second world war it was common for bands or orchestras of a kind to be formed in prisoner of war camps on both sides, and even concentration camps had their music with which the inmates sought to raise their spirits. Protest movements have also been known to harness the power of music and sing of their hope as well as of their sorrows. “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen” sang the negro slaves, but “We shall overcome, we shall overcome some day” sang the African Americans and those who supported their demand for civil rights.

If you were locked up behind bars, or if you were locked up in unfairness, what would you sing?

Paul and Silas sang praise to God. They sang, and the prayers of their singing were heard. There was an earthquake and the bonds that restrained them were broken. They were free. But they did not run away. Doing the right thing had got them in here – giving wholeness and healing to the slave girl. Doing the right thing would keep them there when they could run away. The servants of God do not run away, not when this would bring trouble on someone else. And in this case, if they ran the jailer might as well be dead.

He knew this, and so we have his immortal question “What must I do to be saved?” So many people have taken this to mean that the jailer had seen the truth of the good news Paul and Silas brought and wanted to ensure his eternal salvation. But chances are that he had never heard the good news Paul and Silas were imprisoned for, and that he had never thought about his eternal salvation. Pagans in the ancient world did not think that way. They had no mental medieval picture of a heaven and hell after death. In any

case, it was midnight, there had just been an earthquake, the prison he was responsible for had just burst open, and he thought he was going to be held responsible for escaped prisoners. He wasn't asking Paul about justification by grace through faith.

He was really saying "How can I get out of this mess?" He recognised that Paul and Silas were a bit different from other prisoners he had held, and maybe they could find a way for him to get out of the mess his life had suddenly become. His own way had been to just kill himself and have done. Paul had stopped him from doing this, so maybe there was another way. The answer must have surprised him! "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."

I am reminded of a church leader in Aberdeen years ago, recounting how one night he met a drunk on the street and stopped to help him, if he could. The drunk man had got to the stage where he had just one phrase stuck in his mind which he repeated over and over, and it was "Do you know what I need?" And the Christian leader replied, "You need Jesus." He managed to find details of the man's address, and began to help him home. And as he did so, over and over came the question "Do you know what I need?" and each time he answered "You need Jesus." By the time the man got to his home he was able to answer the question himself. "What do I need? I need Jesus." The Christian man said he liked to imagine what would happen if the man had a wife who on beholding him in that state said, as wives will say "Do you know what you need?" He thought he knew what the surprising answer would be.

The jailer wanted a plan to get him out of the immediate mess he was in. Paul and Silas were able to take his question and lead him deeper in exploring how Jesus could provide, not a quick fix to a problem, but a real long term answer to the questions of life. They were answering both the specific question the jailer had asked and the deep, heart-deep, God-deep question which, with practised eye, they can see lies beneath it. In doing so they show the man – and us – what the good news is all about. It is not about getting in touch with our inner selves. It is not about committing oneself to a life of worship, prayer and good works. It isn't about ourselves at all. It is about looking outward, about recognising and hailing Jesus as Lord. The good news which we receive, and which it is our task to pass on, is not about us, it is about Jesus. That is part of what makes the news good! That is another reason to be singing.

Paul and Silas could sing in the face of adversity. And we all face adversity. If there is one lesson which the gospels and the book of Acts teach us, it is that Christians are not given a free ride in life, an easy passage. Jesus wasn't given that and we are not given it either. Indeed, sometimes, as we live with "Jesus is Lord" as our guide in life, we will be given a harder time – as Paul and Silas were. But we too can sing. We always have reason to sing, for we know what it is to be saved, not just from the immediate mess of our lives, but for all eternity. We know that we are never alone, but that Jesus is always with us. We know that God is working in the world and calls us, privileges us to be a part of what he is doing. We have the inestimable gift of being able to come to God at all and any time, straight into his presence without fear. There are so many reasons we have to sing, how can our tongues so often be silent? Amen