

UPSETTING THE STATUS QUO (Lindfield 2nd June 2019)

ACTS 16: 16-34

As this new movement centred around Jesus of Nazareth spreads throughout Asia-Minor and Europe it's not hard to imagine there will be clashes with religious and civil authorities in various towns and cities. This religion has a new morality, a new and very different way to treating people – especially the poor, the sick, the marginalised and particularly women and children. The reader of Acts should expect confrontations from all sides.

Paul and his team find themselves in Philippi on their way to Macedonia. Lydia had a thriving business dealing in cloth – especially purple cloth which was the colour of the wealthy and the nobility. Since her conversion she makes her home available for the Christian community to meet and there is historical evidence that she also may have funded at least part of Paul's ministry.

One of the characters in the town was a woman who went into a trance-like state and told the future. It was said she had a demon. Her "managers" made a lot of money from her. Somehow she was attracted to the Apostle's message and started following Paul and crying out, "These men are from the Most High God and are telling you how to be saved". Initially you might think that Paul might be pleased to have support even from this unexpected source. But imagine walking the city preaching and praying with this women screaming in your ear. She may have been turning people off.

One of my first jobs after leaving school was working in the Accounts section of what then called Telecom. In those days only the Sydney accounts were computerised. All the regional accounts were produced manually from a huge office above the Imperial Arcade in Pitt St. There was a man in that office who was a very evangelical Christian: so much so that if you got into the same lift as him in the morning he would want you to make a decision for Jesus before you reached the 4th floor. If you were doing something he disapproved of, he would leave you a note on your desk telling you of your wrongdoing and why Jesus didn't approve. Things like smoking, drinking etc. Everyone tried hard to avoid him. He couldn't see that what he was doing was actually harming the gospel and turning people away because he made himself so judgemental and obnoxious. It only took me a few days to decide that the office judged Christians and Christianity by him so I was determined not to let anyone know I was a Christian because I didn't want to be associated with him. I can understand how Paul felt.

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Paul casts out the demon and her “talent” for predicting the future was gone. Those who were profiteering from her were furious and so reported Paul to the Magistrate who had he and Silas flogged and thrown into prison.

We know the story of the earthquake and that Paul and Silas did not escape when they could have. This saved the jailer's life and he was converted by their honesty (and maybe their earlier hymn singing).

This story is about persecution, witnessing and living your life authentically according to the faith you profess.

There are many places today where Christians are being persecuted. Arche in Indonesia; Churches attacked in Sri Lanka on Easter Day with 300 killed and 500 injured and also Priests and worshippers killed in Nigeria.

Sometimes what we think of as “witnessing” actually has the opposite effect. Christians, and the community at large, has disagreed over Israel Folau's comments; Margaret Court was criticised for her comments over same-sex marriage and she then claimed she was being persecuted. I do not believe that people disagreeing with you or even criticising you comes anywhere near being persecution. If we come across just as “wowers” or constantly being seen as being opposed to everything we are not helping. Our position should be seen as being positive and offering a positive alternative for life.

Luke doesn't say whether the crying out of the woman led to anyone's conversion but Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns then not fleeing when the earthquake hit was such a powerful witness in itself it led to the jailer not committing suicide and also to his conversion and that of his entire household. Sometimes the best sermons are those without words but faithful actions. Sometimes there are no words to say but just being there or making a cup of tea is by far the best thing we can do.

Paul is a great believer in “horses for courses”. Here he accepts his punishment and goes to jail in Philippi whereas later on he will refuse punishment and, as he is a Roman Citizen, demand his right to be tried in Rome. Why? Because he has been trying to get to Rome to visit the Christians there but something has always cropped up preventing him going so now he can get there courtesy of the Government.

This story also says a lot about faith vs economic systems. The ones profiteering from this demonic lady lost their source of income and wanted Paul and Silas stopped. The Magistrate saw them as interfering with the good order

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of his town. Ghandi used to say, *capitalism without compassion thrives*. The equation here is simple: vulnerability + ingenuity – compassion = profit. When the gospel gets in the marketplace, those bearing the gospel can become instruments of confrontation or casualties of compromise.

We are sometimes made fun of or brushed aside because of our faith. We need to pray for the wisdom to know when to speak up and when to stay silent. When we do speak should the message be critical or positive or both? Of course we are going to get it wrong sometimes but that must not lead us to stop being who we are. Being a Christian is not an “optional extra” like adding mud flaps to our new car but faith seeps into our very being, everything we do and say. The Holy Spirit is praying for us and has promised to help us. We need to ask. We need to practice. We need to BE.

We can preach a fine sermon or we can stay in jail. Each may be as powerful as the other. Whatever the medium, whatever the circumstances, we are the ones whose task it is to present the Gospel to our generation and society in the hope and with the prayer that our witness may be a link in a chain that brings someone to faith. That is the greatest work of all. AMEN.
