**Sunday 25 May 2025 – Sixth Sunday after Easter – ‘Paul Enters Europe’ - Michael Bayley**

*Today is also the baptism of Sylvia Burnett-Stuart. Michael Bayley examines the description of Paul’s arrival in Philippi. It reveals an extraordinary confidence and joy in the Christian message….and we witness to its continuing wellspring in this act of baptism.*

**Readings:**

Acts 19 : 9-15. John 5 : 1-9.

**Sermon: Michael Bayley - ‘Paul enters Europe’**

The lectionary says rather bossily that if we are only going to have two readings in the service one of them must be this passage from Acts. I wondered why? Paul and Silas had just set off to go round the young churches they had previously set up in Asia minor that is today's Turkey. They had been through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia [16: 6] and they were planning to go further north to Bithynia on the Black Sea coast. But “The spirit of Jesus did not allow them… and a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, ‘come over to Macedonia and help us. And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia.” [16: 9 - 10] so Paul and Silas sailed from Troas to Neapolis and from there they went on to Philippi.

Two points about this. 1st in verse 10 it says “*we* sought to go”. This is the first of four sections of' we' passages in the book of Acts, that is the narrator is part of the action. This may have been Luke himself. The second point is that Paul is coming into Greece, and therefore Europe for the first time and Luke takes pains to underscore the thoroughly Gentile non Jewish setting. At the outset, he notes the city's status as a Roman colony, Roman officials play prominent roles. It is made clear that that is a minimal Jewish presence. Unlike most other cities visited by Paul, it does not have a synagogue, only a place of prayer.

How does Paul set about preaching the gospel in a completely new setting? This is cold calling with a vengeance. He does what he generally does. Having gone to the place of prayer (the meaning of this is not entirely clear) he finds someone who is' a worshipper of God' or a' God fearer'. These are gentiles who worship with the Jews. They may not have joined completely but they are very sympathetic. Many of these people also proved to be sympathetic to the message of Jesus and this proves to be the case here. “One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul.” Paul did not say: “you must join a 10 week baptism course.” She was immediately baptised with her whole household.” In addition she said “if you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And that is just what they did.

This was only the first thing that happened at Philippi. A slave girl with a spirit of divination kept on following Paul saying “these men are servants of the most high God who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” Paul got fed up with this, cast the spirit out of the girl which annoyed her owners because she stopped making money for them. So the owners dragged Paul and Silas to the magistrates saying they were advocating customs which were illegal for Romans to accept. Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison . That night about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the prisoners were listening to them. One wonders if some of the prisoners might have wanted to go to sleep. Then there is an earthquake, the foundations of the prison were shaken, all the doors were opened everyone's fetters were unfastened. The gaoler wakes up and is about to kill himself thinking the prisoners had escaped but Paul says: “Do not harm yourself we are all here. The jailer calls for lights rushes in to Paul and Silas and says,’ what must I do to be saved? ‘The jailer and his family are baptised, he washes their wounds and brings some food.

When in the morning the magistrates send to say that Paul and Silas should be released, Paul insists that because they had had them, Roman citizens and uncondemned, beaten publicly, the magistrates must come and apologise and the magistrates do so.

it is all rather breathless and really quite extraordinary. The way Paul and Silas talk about the good news of Jesus with such confidence and their sheer nerve in insisting that the magistrates should come and apologise to them before they would leave the prison. The last verse of this Philippi chapter is highly significant. “So Paul and Silas went out of the prison, and visited Lydia; And when they had seen the brethren, they exhorted them and departed. [16: 40] They left behind a small but fully functioning local church.

The book of Acts reflects this extraordinary energy and confidence born of their conviction that Christ is risen and those early Christians could not stop themselves from letting other people know. I think it is helpful not to tie ourselves in knots asking was there really an earthquake in the prison? and to see it as part of a way of expressing the extraordinary confidence and joy of those early Christians in the realisation that Christ was still alive as an active presence in their lives and empowering them. It was not just the people we know about like Paul who spread the news. All sorts of people like travellers and merchants did the same.

The story in Acts is astonishing. It is also astonishing that we are meeting here 2000 years later motivated by the same conviction that Christ is risen, alive and active in the world and in our lives. What is more we are going to do the same for Sylvia as was done for Lydia, the cloth merchant and her family, and for the gaoler and his family. Sylvia will be baptised as they were all those centuries ago. The circumstances maybe less dramatic. I hope we're not going to have an earthquake but in essence it is just the same. Sylvia and her family and the stand they are taking today by having Sylvia baptised are saying , Yes the story goes on and we want to be part of that community, the church which goes on living and proclaiming the extraordinary and amazing reality that Christ is risen. Death and evil did not have the last word. The god of love did.

The passage from John in the gospel complements this energy and enthusiasm of Acts with a calm confident assurance. “The counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” [14: 26- 27]

Sylvia may you grow up to be blessed with both the energy and confidence we read about in the book of Acts and also that confident assurance from John's gospel. “Sylvia, peace I leave with you: my peace I give you, not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”

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