

Acts 16:16-34**Keep pure the gospel message**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever noticed that some people seem to attract trouble? It doesn't matter what they do, whether they have good intentions or not, trouble always finds them. The apostle Paul's missionary journeys seem to fit the bill here. There were shipwrecks and beatings and imprisonments, and in today's reading from Acts, a demon-possessed fortune-telling slave girl. In this case, the trouble literally followed Paul. The reading says that day after day the girl followed Paul and Silas, and cried out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved."

At first, we might wonder why this counts as trouble. The girl is double bound in both slavery and demon possession. Apart from her fortune-telling ability, she is a nobody. And yet, she speaks the truth about Paul and his partners, following them all around town and providing free advertising for Paul's ministry. But Paul grows weary of this and rebukes the demon, who leaves her and leaves her without her fortune-telling ability. We're not told why Paul finally had had enough of this particular bit of trouble.

Firstly, the girl was telling the truth about who they were and the message they preached so that should be okay. Some have suggested that calling them "Servants of the most high God" is the issue because it implies the pagan idea of multiple gods. But this phrase, although uncommon, is a perfectly fine reference to the one true God. When the angel Gabriel tells Mary she will give birth to a son and is to give him the name Jesus, he then says, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." So I don't think that's where the issue lies.

The girl also says that Paul and Silas are telling you how to be saved, or a way to salvation. There's some debate about the translation there, whether it's "a way" to salvation or "the way" to salvation. Of course, Jesus is the only way to the Father, so proclaiming "a way" to salvation is troublesome, but that's getting very nit-picky about grammar, and I'd be surprised if that was the biggest problem here. I think the trouble is not in the message but in the messenger, and the whole situation around this slave girl.

We say don't shoot the messenger, but there are times when the right message said in the wrong way has completely the opposite effect. I think that's what we're dealing with here. Even though the truth is proclaimed, it's tainted by all the sin that surrounds this slave girl. The source of her knowledge and her role as a profitable fortune-teller spoils the clear gospel message that Paul and Silas are bringing to the people.

When Paul has had enough of this, he commands the demon to leave. We hear nothing of how this changed the life of the slave girl. But it does bring Paul some more trouble. We might expect people who witness an exorcism to react with awe and wonder, and perhaps even faith. But instead, we see anger and greed and even some racism. The owners of the slave girl have lost their money maker. They clearly didn't care about her wellbeing, just the fact that her demon inspired fortune-telling was a good earner. And so angered by Paul, they revert to the worst of human traits, blaming the outsiders. "The whole city is in an uproar because of these Jews! They are teaching customs that are illegal for us Romans to practice." It's a totally baseless accusation and means they add bearing false witness to their list of sins, but it stirs up enough people that a mob is formed, and Paul and Silas are beaten and thrown in prison. This is not what the gospel proclamation is supposed to achieve.

In some ways, Paul is now vindicated in his decision to rebuke the demon and free the girl. The gospel message would otherwise have been tied up with unchristian things. Any sort of fortune-telling or communicating with spirits is at best a lie aimed at taking your money. At worst it is actual interaction with demons. Either way, Christians should be avoiding such things and trusting in God for the answers that we might be seeking. And then we have the unbridled desire for profit. The owners of the slave girl just kept her around because she could make them money. And again, we should be avoiding anything that puts money first, turning it into an idol. The gospel message is too readily tainted by those who seek earthly riches above caring for their neighbour or the life of self-sacrifice that Jesus calls his disciples to live.

This exchange really is a great example of all the wrong things to do. And it's a great example of how the world can still react even when the gospel message is not compromised. People do not want to hear it. They will reject it sometimes in violent ways. It seems like the powers of this world have put a stop to the gospel proclamation because Paul and Silas end up in prison. But the first sign that the powers of this world are really not in charge comes with the sound of singing from deep in the prison cells.

Paul and Silas sing praises to God. They praise God for the privilege of being God's servants in the face of injustice. And the other prisoners pay attention. Their desire to maintain the truth and purity of the gospel message has perhaps given them a new audience who need to hear it. Now God has already freed his preachers from Roman prisons twice in Acts, so we shouldn't be surprised that this Philippian jail can't hold Paul and Silas, can't stop the gospel being preached, can't restrain the Spirit from bringing people to faith.

We see the Spirit at work with the jailer and his entire household. They were saved because Paul and Silas didn't give up on the pure gospel message. They didn't let anything corrupt it, either directly or indirectly through association. That's the lesson we also need to learn. When people hear the gospel message from Christians and then see things from those same Christians that completely go against what Jesus teaches, it's the gospel message that gets lost. We might still be comfortable in our faith, secure in our salvation, but it's all too easy to give others an excuse to not believe.

We are called to something higher, to a life of self-giving service, to refrain from the things our sinful human nature finds so appealing at times. And this is not primarily for our sake, but for the sake of the world. This is so a world lost in sin, in all sorts of life-destroying practices, might find freedom in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and find new life, a restored life, in him and his forgiveness. This is our highest goal. That the gospel may be proclaimed in all its fullness and purity to the whole world, so that sinners might repent and turn to God in faith, and that God might be given all praise and glory in earth and in heaven, for all eternity. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.