

‘At midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God’

They weren’t in church, they were in prison! What were you doing at midnight last night? You were probably tucked up safely in bed asleep. And if you had been in prison, is that what you would have been doing? ...

‘praying and singing hymns to God?...’

let’s go back over this. Story a bit ...

Last week we left Paul at Lydia’s house ... now, they are going about speaking and telling their stories, and a pushy woman starts bugging them... Ironically, she names the truth, ‘they are followers of the most high God’ ... but for some reason, Paul becomes initiated by her repeated utterings, no doubt egged on by her owner. Her claims were not authentic searchings, or a desire to follow, but performance, shallow spectacular but truth none the less ...

Paul heals her of this gift of hers, so that she is no longer ‘marketable’ for her owners ... who has the power here?

And now what happens? Is she thrown back to the slave market ready to be sold again ... or perhaps does Lydia and her community find a way to embrace the girl? We don’t know. The story leaves us with question ... and perhaps the challenge:

How do we offer welcome to those whose chains have been broken ... Those who have been released from the ties that bind – relationships, work, mental illness, ...

There are a lot of layers to this story. There is no doubt however that the girl’s owners were furious! Paul and Silas are not going to get away with this! They’ll pay! The city magistrates charged Paul and Silas and the others with disturbing the peace in promoting customs not lawful for Rome (They do not yet know that Paul is indeed a Roman citizen ... the plot thickens! They’ll be embarrassed later to find out about Paul’s citizenship! Their accusation of what is not lawful to ‘adopt’ shares the same root with the verb translated elsewhere as ‘welcome’

This somewhat rough ‘welcome’ by the Philippians city leader contrasts markedly with that of Lydia – who invited them home ... Paul and Silas are slapped in prison often being bashed – their legs are shackled to the wall ... a sorry state of affairs ...

But what do they do? How do they respond? Come miserably? No, ‘they pray loud and sing hymns to God’. That caught the other prisoner’s attention. That encouraged them, kept their spirits up. They are praying and singing hymns to God, when an earthquake opens doors and breaks their chains! What do they do? They stay there ... and save the jailer from taking his life. What an amazing scene. Why didn’t they just escape? Don’t know ... the story doesn’t say.

But the narrative now shifts to rituals of worship ... The gaoler, like the good Samaritan takes them into the house and tends to their wounds. He comes for Paul and Silas; and he and his household, like Lydia, are baptised. Now that’s surprising!

As ... with Lydia, Paul and Silas and the gaoler engage in reciprocal ministry – they all model faith, ritual, reciprocal ministry – collegiality ... and God’s Spirit brings life, through rituals and prayer, compassion and sacrament..

Last night I had a special email from someone who has recently begun attending Holy Covenant, spoke of the welcome and love he received here. This person spoke of healing and purpose, and God’s presence, with him, and his desire to be Baptised! I was blown away!

When I was living in Adelaide, a friend from Canberra was over visiting his friend who was ill in hospital. He asked me to see his friend with him, so together we went up to visit his very ill friend who was receiving bone marrow transplant..

I think I asked if he’d like me to pray for him. He said ‘yes’ and we all held hands while I prayed. Mates, the sick man said he felt incredible warmth during that prayer, and light, this was a man of faith, but his friend’s visit, and our time of prayer changed his life. He went into remission for a while.

Ritual and prayer, compassion and sacrament .. make a difference

What sustains you when you are imprisoned, down, ill, out of sorts? Challenged? ..

I often say the Lord’s Prayer

Or pray my mantra ‘maranatha’ ‘Come Lord come’

I sometimes sing psalm 121 ‘I lift my eyes to the quiet hills’ or psalm 23 ‘the Lord’s my shepherd’ or ‘I am the one who healeth thee ..’

I pray for courage, for wisdom, for strength ... Prayers at the bedside of someone sick, or distressed or even angry makes a difference as does singing and anointing ..

Gail Dau wouldn't let me anoint her when she first had the stroke because she thought it meant she was going to die, and she didn't want that! Look at her now! Laying on of hands, anointing, prayer, song, confession ..; these rituals can be sustaining and nourishing ..

But they can also be wooden or plastic, without zing, if not harmful even, if not practical with authenticity, integrity, genuineness

'At midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God' ..

and look what a difference that made!

I've just returned from three days at Clergy Conference down at Bateman's Bay. It was a stimulating thought provoking conference with presentations on collaborative ministry by Bp Stephen Pickard, and bible studies led by Geneive Blackwell, rector of Yass.

Each day began with singing and morning prayers or Eucharist, and ended at 9pm with compline – prayers at the end of the day.

Surprisingly, the worship times were a bit of a struggle. Some clergy seemed to race through the canticles and psalms, while others wanted to say them more slowly. In the end we had individuals read the canticles for the whole group – an interesting dynamic.

How would you describe our worship here?

How can I live with the abundance in the middle of difficulties? How can we sensitively bring the fullness of our lives to worship? What are the life deepening choices that you face today? If others listened to our prayers and music.. what message would they hear?

Dorothy McRae-McMahon writes:

*I first met Jessica Sales in the 1970's when I was in the Philippines talking with people in the churches about their work in opposition to the Marcos regime. A group of us had a role in taking this information out to churches around the world so that they could be supportive of this struggle for justice.*

*Jessica had just graduated as a young social worker and was setting up groups to support the families of political prisoners in Manilla. These families were not only finding it hard to survive as they lived in fear, but they also knew that they may never see their loved one again, such was the brutality of the regime. Jessica knew that she was taking a risk in doing this work, but she felt very passionate about its importance.*

*The Christian Conference of Asia, with its delegates from 17 different Asian countries, had intended to hold its three yearly Assembly meetings in Manilla in 1977. But it was decided to move it to Penang, given the political climate in the Philippines..*

*I had been asked to co-chair the first Asian Women's Forum as a lead into the Assembly and there we heard much more about the widespread oppression and bloodshed in the Philippines and the brave stand of many parts of the church in response to it. I will always remember Sister Christine Tan looking at us all, after she had told us of her friend lying dying after being bashed by the military. As we sat there crying, she said, "I don't want your tears, I don't even want your prayers. I want your anger!" Jessica Sales was one woman there who already knew what Christine meant and who had chosen to take brave and creative action in response.*

*We sat together in the plenary sessions of the assembly and compared notes as the various keynote addresses and workshops were held. I listened to this wise young woman and marvelled at her commitment. Jessica had been asked to do a workshop on her work in Manilla. After she finished the workshop, we met again in the plenary hall. I asked her how the workshop had gone. She said, "It went really well, Dorothy." Then she paused and said, "But I think those words may cost me my life." While I sat there and wondered what on earth to say in response to that, I saw her looking into the distance as she reflected. Then she said firmly, "But I must live!"*

*What could I say? I just held her hand in silence. I knew what she was saying. The Jesus Christ I serve must have said something like that to himself as he walked towards the powers of oppression in his day.*

*There was a spy in that Christian Conference who reported Jessica to the military in the Philippines. When she returned to Manilla Airport, they were waiting to arrest her. A few months later, her body was found in a mass grave and showing evidence of shocking torture.*

*I hold Jessica Sales as an icon in my life. She saw that there are many ways to die. Perhaps the greatest death we ever enter is the death of not responding to the suffering and oppression of others. Our souls die within us, whether we recognise that or not. None of us will ever carry all the pain of the world within us, other than Jesus Christ. But some inspiring human beings will bear some of that load and will choose life in ways beyond*

*our imagining. Jessica Sales was one of those people. (by Dorothy McRae-McMahon from Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life. Easter 2010)*