Home Service Sheet for Sunday 29th M
Call To Worship:                Psalm 97:1-6

The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice;
    let the many coastlands be glad!
Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
    righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
Fire goes before him
    and burns up his adversaries all around.
His lightnings light up the world;
    the earth sees and trembles.
The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,
    before the Lord of all the earth.
The heavens proclaim his righteousness,
    and all the peoples see his glory.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, to You belongs all the praise and glory! In the beginning You created the heavens and the Earth, and everything in them. The mountains and hills speak of Your wonder, and Your beauty is reflected in flowers, animals and the majesty of creation. To their wondrous chorus of praise we add our voices in worship. As we come before You now, O Lord, we ask that You would help us to focus on You and not get distracted. May Your Holy Spirit enable and empower us to understand and apply Your Word in our lives. Amen.

Hymn                            The Lord is King by Josiah Conder
<https://youtu.be/MBltYW1bWkk>

The Lord is King! lift up your voice, O earth, and all ye heavens rejoice;
From world to world the joy shall ring: ‘The Lord omnipotent is King!’

The Lord is King! who then shall dare resist His will, distrust His care,
Or murmur at His wise decrees, or doubt His royal promises?

The Lord is King! child of the dust, the Judge of all the earth is just;
Holy and true are all His ways: let every creature speak His praise.

He reigns! ye saints, exalt your strains; your God is King, your Father reigns:
And He is at the Father’s side, the Man of Love, the Crucified.

Come, make your wants, your burdens known; He will present them at the throne;
And angel bands are waiting there His messages of love to bear.

One Lord and Saviour all secures; He reigns, and life and death are yours,
Through earth and Heaven one song shall ring, ‘The Lord omnipotent is King!’

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Bible Reading:          Acts 16:16-34

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

Sermon

There is a well-known saying, ‘One good deed deserves another’, but that’s not what happens in our Bible reading today. Through the power of God, a young woman is released from the bondage of an evil spirit, but instead of grateful thanks. Paul and his companions receive a beating and imprisonment. In this life there are no guarantees that doing the right thing will bring us positive results. What is going on, and how could a sovereign God, who is in control of all things, allow this to happen to His disciples?

Let’s begin by looking at the context here. These incidents all happen in Philippi, a city in the North Eastern part of Greece. As such the culture would have been Gentile, and the deities worshipped and celebrated there would have been the gods of Greece and Rome. The slave girl referred to in verse 16 would have been seen as a valuable asset by her owner, as an ability to ‘tell the future’ would have been very attractive and lucrative. In Greek society the priestesses of Delphi had a particularly high reputation for doing this, and were well paid for doing so. Of course, the reality was then, as it is today, that the vast majority of ‘fortune telling’ is made up and deliberately vague. However, there is the odd exception that may well be demonically inspired, and this is the case here with the slave girl. She keeps following Paul and proclaiming, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” (v.17)

Now, at first, this might seem like a good thing as this information she spoke was true, and as is said today ‘there’s no so thing as bad publicity’. Except, there is! The source of these words were the problem, because they gave some credibility to this girl and her gift of divination. So instead of leading people to faith in Jesus they would be amazed by this slave girl instead. Paul seemingly gets frustrated and, through the power of God’s Spirit, he casts this spirit out of the girl. In passing it’s good to note how this is described as happening in verse 18, “it came out that very hour”. When God does something outside of the natural ways of this world, whether healing or casting out an evil spirit, it is immediate and complete. Anything other than is not from God.

So far, so good. The slave girl is freed from the spirit who had bound her, and Paul and his companions can get on with proclaiming the good news of Jesus. However, some were very angry about what Paul had done, as a good source of their income had now dried up. No longer could they charge folk for this slave to tell them their fortune, and so they began stirring up trouble against Paul and his companions. We are told how they were in effect arrested, beaten and thrown into jail without any hint of a fair trial. Yet this passage is not about injustice, or at least not social injustice. Rather this reading is all about the greatest injustice of all – sinners being forgiven their sin, and being born anew into eternal life, despite deserving punishment instead.

Scripture is not concerned with the miscarriage of justice that Paul and Silas endured, but rather with the way that God brought about His plans and purposes through these powerless, imprisoned men. The whole Biblical book of the Acts of the Apostles is the story of how the Gospel of Jesus spread throughout the known world through a bunch of mainly Jewish, uneducated men within a generation. It is both a testimony of what did happen, and an encouragement for us to continue this God-given task of sharing the good news. It also shows us time and again that God is truly in control over all circumstances and events, whether that be persecution, imprisonment, beatings, shipwrecks or executions. Through it all, God’s Name is lifted high and the Gospel message is proclaimed far and wide with the result that many people are saved.

Let’s now look at the specifics of our reading here. In verse 25 we are told how Paul and Silas were behaving in prison – singing songs of praise to God and praying. They recognised that God us worthy of praise whatever our situation in life, whether good or bad. This is certainly something we can learn from and follow. God is still God, whether it’s raining or sunny, whether we are doing well or struggling with ill health, and He is worthy of our praise. We shouldn’t see this passage as a pattern to follow, but rather as a description of a particular event. If we find ourselves in prison for following Jesus we shouldn’t expect God to rescue us through an earthquake or some other supernatural occurrence. We should, however, thank and praise God for who He is, and for the fact that He is always with us.

Instead let us look at how God enabled Paul to make the most of an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel so that people placed their faith in Jesus Christ and were saved. Their chains were loosed by the earthquake, but they did not escape. Instead they stayed where they were and answered the desperate question of the jailer in the best possible way. The Philippian jailer asked them, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (v.30) Are we ready to answer that very question if, or when, somebody asks that of us? Can we simply and effectively communicate the Gospel message to folk today? Thankfully, as Christians, we have the Holy Spirit dwelling inside us and He will help us to proclaim the Gospel effectively, so we are not on our own. However, we need to have a basic understanding of how we are saved from the effects of our sin and are forgiven, being born again to eternal life.

Paul and Silas reply in verse 31, saying “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” Belief in Jesus here is believing that He was who He said He was – the Son of God, the perfect spotless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It also believing that He did what Scripture said He did – dying in our place, paying the price for our sin, so that through faith in Him our sins might be forgiven. It also points to Jesus being Lord, and this means we are to obey Him, not because that obedience earns us forgiveness or salvation, but rather because that is the right thing to do in thanks to Him. Let us be ready and willing to share the Gospel so that there will be rejoicing amongst folk today, just as there was in the household of the Philippian jailer that night! Amen!

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God we thank You for this simple truth that all we have to do to be saved is believe on the finished work of the Lord Jesus on the cross. We know that there are many people in the world today, that have not yet believed this simple truth. We pray that You will use us to share the good news of the glorious Gospel of Christ, so that others may come to a saving knowledge of this saving truth. Loving Father, we thank You that we are saved by grace through trusting in Jesus. Thank You that all we need to know to live a Christian life by faith is found in the Word of God. May we each honour You by living every part of our lives trusting in the Lord Jesus – for without Him we can do nothing - but we can do all things through faith in Christ, who gives me the strength to stand firm. In His previous Name we pray, amen.

Benediction

May the blessing of Almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with us today and forevermore, amen.