

WELLBEING MATTERS

Acts 16:16-34

May 8 2016

Two of the very first missionaries of the church, Paul and Silas, encounter an unusual situation in our reading today in Acts.

They are in a town called Philippi, in Macedonia, telling people the news of Jesus and they meet an unnamed slave girl who is under the control of a group of men.

Now these men aren't pimps and the girl is not providing sex but their relationship with her is like that of pimp and prostitute. They control her, she works for them, and they take the bulk of the money she earns.

Except in this case she's not earning money by offering sexual favours – she's selling fortunes to the gullible.

She's predicting futures, and speaking in a voice that does not seem to be her own.

Writing about this incident back in the 1970's the well-known Scottish Bible commentator Willie Barclay had this blunt assessment of her.

"She was mad, and the ancient world had a strange respect for mad people because, they said, the gods had taken away their wits in order to put the mind of the gods into them. She was probably also gifted with a natural turn for ventriloquism."

(Barclay: Acts p124)

Luke, (the writer of Acts) says that she seemed to be possessed with some kind of evil spirit.

Whatever the mental health or mental capacity of this girl it is clear that she is being exploited for profit.

She has no choice. She has no say.

She is not free. She is being abused.

When Paul cures her in Jesus' name, and sets her free, those men who were using her to make a fast buck are furious and out to get these two Christians.

They're not interested in her wellbeing. They're not really interested in her.

They're only interested in the money that they can make out of her.

So in their rage, they turn on Paul and Silas.

And they are eventually able to drag them to the public square and have them whipped and thrown into jail.

Sometimes doing what is right can have bad consequences...

Now what happens next to Paul and Silas is very exciting and dramatic. The story continues with them.

And most every sermon you will hear on this passage of scripture will end up being about the dramatic story of Paul and Silas in jail.

And no wonder! It's a great story.

But today I don't want to follow Paul and Silas to the jail.

Instead I want to stop to ask about the girl.

She is no longer mentioned in the Book of Acts. I wonder what eventually happened to her?

Don't mean her whole life story – *she eventually gets married to a guy called Eddie and finds a job in Marks and Spencer's. She has two sons who end up working in the bank....*

I'm thinking more about the immediate response.

She was cured. She was set free. She was no longer under the control of those men.

In fact, they had no use for her now anyway.

What did **she** do next?

She was healed in Jesus' name. So did she become a follower of Jesus herself?

Given that the Bible doesn't tell us I am going to be really controversial here and suggest two possibilities.

Maybe she did and maybe she didn't.....!

Last week, we heard the story of another healing. It was that of a man who lay paralysed beside a pool of water for 38 years.

When Jesus met that man he healed him.

It's a great story, but what happened to the man after that?

Was he grateful?

We can't be sure, but it's hard to believe that he wouldn't be!

I think it's a safe assumption to assume he would be very thankful indeed.

But did he become a follower of Jesus?

Again you would think that after this he might well be a follower of Jesus, but we don't know for sure.

We **do** know that one day Jesus healed ten lepers and only one even bothered to thank him.

We know that Jesus healed many people and that he had many followers, but we do **not** know that all the people that Jesus healed and helped became followers.

In fact we know that while some did, some did not.

It seemed that Jesus and the early Christians realised this – that health and support, compassion and wellbeing was important for its own sake.

Jesus never said, *“I will help you only if you worship me”*.

Jesus never said, *“I will heal you only if you promise to follow me”*.

Jesus said he had come to bring life in all its fullness.

God wants our lives to be as good as they can be.

Jesus never had an ulterior motive for showing love and treating people well.

When Jesus loved people,

when Jesus had compassion on people,

when Jesus healed them and accepted them and cared for them,

and stood up for them,

he did not demand something in return.

Because his love (like God’s love) is unconditional.

We are called to share the news of God’s love.

We are called to share our faith.

We are also called to care and befriend and support. And our efforts to care for those around us are worth it for their own sake.

If the things we do in this church involve people coming to church and joining in our fellowship then that’s great news.

But it’s not a condition of our care and effort just as our response to God is not a condition of what God thinks of us.

One myth about church is that in the end all that matters is getting bums on seats.

In other words, the only real task of the church is to increase its membership.

Now I happen to care about getting people to be part of church.

I want to encourage people to be part of this church and I pray that we can grow numerically as well as spiritually.

I think that’s one of our aims.

But that is not the only concern of church.

We are also called to show love and care and offer support to others.

We are also called to encourage and bless the people in the community around us, and that has to be done with no strings attached. It has to be done for its own sake.

Both of these things matter.

Building a community of faith and showing care concern and support to others.

Jesus called people to follow him. That invitation was for everyone.

But Jesus also cared and healed and encouraged those in need - irrespective of how they responded to his call.

There are two words you hear in church circles which relate to these two aspects. The words are **fellowship** and **hospitality**.

At first glance these words might appear to be two words for the same thing, but they actually mean different things.

“Fellowship is the experience of community, of care, and of life together among believers within the Christian community; hospitality is the welcoming of the stranger, providing care and support and welcome to those who are not already part of the community or congregation.

And it may well mean providing welcome to those who are ‘not like us.’

Often fellowship, in practice, has come to mean loving those and caring for those who are pretty much like us, or who we anticipate will turn out to be pretty much like us, if only we get to know them better...

But hospitality does not make such promises.”

(Anthony B Robinson: Called to be Church p203)

Fellowship is about us. It’s about our relationships here in this church group.

Hospitality is our relationship with people who are not part of our fellowship. They may be people in need.

They may be our neighbours in the community. They may be people very different from us.

They may not be much interested in our Christian faith.

How do we act towards people like that?

If all we have is fellowship,
if all we have is a group of friends,
if all we are is similar and like-minded people
then what we have isn’t a church but a club.

A true church has fellowship, a real sense of Christian community but it also has a hospitable spirit – a capacity to welcome the stranger and to offer care and support to our neighbours - without strings attached.

How we love, how we care - especially with respect to those outside our church family, is vitally important.

And maybe you will understand why on this particular Sunday I have asked Linda to speak about Finn’s Place.

Finn’s Place isn’t just ‘*a project that is run in our building*’.

It’s not just ‘*a project run by a group of Christians*’.

Finn’s Place is Langside Church’s **own** project.

This is what we do right here to offer hospitality, enhance wellbeing, and reach out to others in our community.

The project is chaired by one of our members,
the employees are members,

the board is staffed with members,
and the main funding comes from the Church of Scotland and Langside Church.

We hope that you will support it through your prayers, and giving.
We hope you will consider volunteering and helping out when you can.
And we hope that you will remember another 'plus' for us about this project....

It is not solely for people who are outside our fellowship.
We **all** need to work on our wellbeing and everything that is offered by Finn's is offered to each of us, as well as those in our community.

And the reason why the Church of Scotland nationally gives our congregation so much money to support this is because the folk in the funding committee in Edinburgh see this project as a ground-breaking example of how churches can do hospitality and show love in action.

This is our ministry of hospitality.
It doesn't replace all our worship and fellowship.
It stands alongside it.

This place is a place for people of faith.
But it's also a place of welcome of acceptance,
promoting friendship and wellbeing
and we do this unashamedly in Jesus' name,
because this is the kind of church that echoes the concern,
the work, and the love of Jesus himself.