

## **Acts 16: 16-34**

Good morning. My name is Jan Malpas, I'm a Reader.

Today's reading from the Book of Acts gives us a glimpse of the lifestyle of Paul and Silas, the leaders of a group of disciples who were eagerly spreading the news of Jesus' life and teaching. The account of their travels through the lands bordering the Mediterranean makes a great adventure story, while giving us insights into Paul's generosity as he illustrated and lived out God's word. He encountered a great variety of people in very varied circumstances, there was no 'one size fits all' way of bringing Jesus' love to them. Today's passage shines a spotlight on freedom, especially the true freedom that following Jesus brings. It's not being free to do as we like without concern for God or for others but being released from any oppression that prevents us from being truly ourselves. We are free to choose our priorities and standards because we're safe in God's love. In Philippi, a Roman colony, Paul encountered people who certainly could not take freedom for granted. We first encounter a slave-girl, who was owned like an animal is owned and used to make money like an animal is used. That's horrible enough but she was also possessed by a spirit, an alien, perverse spirit, which caused her to keep following Paul and Silas as they tried to preach and teach.

The spirit had originally seemed helpful to the girl, enabling her to tell fortunes. There are always gullible people willing to pay for that service so her owners realised that they had bought themselves a nice little earner, as it's known in the trade, because all the income went to them. Of course, evil spirits enjoy messing people up, any people - they really don't care and this one was having a field day. He'd messed up the poor girl by taking her over, then he messed up her owners, by causing her to lose interest in fortune-telling and prefer to stalk Paul and Silas instead. She mocked them, pretending to help their cause, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." No doubt she was quite a comic turn, complete with funny walk and silly voice. After a few days of this, she was getting on Paul's nerves so, in the name of Jesus Christ, he commanded the spirit to come out of her, which of course it did. The girl regained possession of her mind, but the owners of her body were furious because they could no longer exploit her fortune-telling. They dragged Paul and Silas in front of the magistrates, saying, "These men are Jews and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to practice."

The magistrates ordered Paul and Silas to be 'severely flogged and thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. He put them in an inner cell and fastened their feet in stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them...there was a violent earthquake...the prison doors flew open and the everybody's chains came loose.' When the jailer woke to see the doors open, he assumed that the prisoners had escaped and drew his sword to commit suicide, seeing it as the least worse option, certainly preferable to Roman justice. 'But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We're all here."

The jailer brought lights and 'fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved – you and your household."

Even though it was the middle of the night, Paul and Silas went to the jailer's home, where they explained Jesus' teaching to everyone there and everyone in the house was baptised. The jailer was filled with joy. He washed Paul and Silas's wounds and set a meal before them. If you read on to the end of the chapter, you'll find that this story has quite a happy ending.

In a few verses, we've encountered different kinds of imprisonment and different kinds of freedom. The poor slave girl was owned body and mind, yet when Paul called on the name of Jesus, she was freed to think and speak as she saw fit. On the other hand, Paul and Silas always had that freedom and they were willing to use it. Even when they were chained up in a prison cell, they could sing and pray. They chose to worship God really loudly so their fellow prisoners would also benefit, in fact they chose to continue to live out Jesus' gift of generous love. When God loosened their chains, they didn't just scarp, they showed consideration to their jailer, enabling him and all his household to find the freedom brought about by Jesus' teaching. The jailer went from being totally dominated by the authorities to confidently bringing the ex-prisoners to his own home, so that he and his family could care for them and learn to live in the true freedom of following Jesus.