

Green Philippians:
Three Sermons on Paul's Letter to the Philippians
Preached by the Reverend Trevor Jamison,
Environmental Chaplain, Eco-Congregation Scotland

Sermon Two – A Tale of Three Slaves

Acts 16:16-24; Philippians 2:5-13

A Tale of Three Slaves: for Saint Paul, they were the best of times, they were the worst of times. They were the times he kick-started a Christian congregation into being in the Greek town of Philippi. They were also the times he not only got beaten up and but also banged up, and put into the securest cell of the local jail. Despite what sceptical bible scholars might tell us, you just couldn't make this stuff up.

All was going well in Paul's project of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Following on from his chat with members of a women-only prayer group that met by the riverside of this historic Roman colony, Lydia, a cloth dealer from Thyatira, in what is present-day Turkey, had been baptised into the Church. Also baptised were her household, presumably including those who worked in her business as employees or slaves.

Speaking of slaves, though, things quickly lurched from good to bad, then from bad to worse as far as Saint Paul was concerned. I would find it a little unnerving to have someone following me around the streets of Edinburgh, shouting at the top of their voice, “This man is a slave of the Most High God, who proclaims to you a way of salvation.” A publicity is supposed to be good publicity but there are limits.

Most people probably only get to hear this slave girl as their paths cross. Saint Paul, on the other hand, has to put up with it, we are told, ‘for **many** days’ (16:18). No wonder he is described as ‘very much annoyed’ (16:18), and it’s understandable that he snapped, removing the slave girl’s ability to tell fortunes, and so depriving her owners of a valuable source of income.

In those days, to question the social, political and economic status quo earned you opposition, just it does the same today. To take an action that threatens the status quo invited and invites retribution; which is what happens to Paul, and to Silas, who is unfortunate enough to be accompanying him when things kick off.

When dragged before the local magistrates, who because of Philippi’s colony status report to Rome, the charge is, ‘These men are disturbing our city; they are

Jews and they are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe' (16:20, 21). Actually though, it was when the owners of this slave girl saw that 'their hope of making money was gone [that] they seized Paul and Silas, and dragged them to the marketplace before the authorities' (16:19) It's not just that they were advocating unusual or unlawful customs but that their actions struck at the very root of institutions that bound economy, society and the empire together: making money and having slaves.

What's the point of owning a slave if someone is just going to render them worthless to you? This slave girl, this valuable money-making asset, has now been turned into a financial liability; still needing feeding, clothing and housing, despite the fact that her power of divination and fortune-telling has been turned off by a troublemaker from Tarsus. True, she's only one slave, but slaves are essential to keeping the economy going, and if they do this to one slave ...

I wonder what Lydia thought? After all, as a woman with a business, as the head of a household, it was odds-on that some or all of her workers were her slaves. How are you to run a successful business, to put food on the table, to provide for your family, if this essential element in the economic system is removed? Did Lydia ever dream that when she shifted from being a general 'worshiper of God' to specifically being a follower of Jesus, that she might be

embroiled in threatening to undermine the institution of slavery and so tear apart the fabric of society? I suspect not!

So there we have two out of the three slaves in this tale: an unnamed slave girl and Saint Paul. When she publicly outed Paul as a ‘slave of the Most High God’ that’s exactly what he was. When, some time after this event, Paul writes his letter to that Christian congregation, he begins, ‘Paul and Timothy, **slaves** of Christ Jesus, to all the saints who are in Christ Jesus in Philippi’ (1:1)

“Slaves”! If that girl, that woman, **was** now a member of the congregation (I like to imagine that Paul got Lydia to buy her from her disgruntled owners) you can just imagine other members of the congregation, listening to the letter read out, nudging her and muttering, ‘Maybe you can’t do that divination thing nowadays but you were right on the money then.’ And then, in the part of Paul’s letter we have heard read today, slave number three turns up.

But before we get to number three let’s take a Christian leaf out of Saint Paul’s book and seriously consider undermining essential institutions and tearing apart the fabric of society: what’s a church for, after all? Today, we here are the beneficiaries of a particular economic system called “capitalism”, which

encourages trade and profit through private ownership rather than state control; everything from one-woman or one-man businesses to multinational corporations that have budgets bigger than that of many nation-states. This system has enriched us and billions of other people. We are also aware that there are those who don't do so well, and maybe we worry that their poverty and exclusion is integral to how capitalism works. We are often told, however, there's no viable alternative to this approach.

Part and parcel of this all is the drive to consume – Tesco ergo sum; I shop therefore I am – and this whole system is oiled, both literally and metaphorically, by the fossil fuels – coal, oil and gas – that heat and light our homes, offices and schools; power our manufacturing; and fuel our transport by road, sea and air. Unfortunately, it turns out that as we continue to use these fuels at this rate we change the world's climate, damaging others, particularly the poor, future generations, other species, and perhaps the very fabric of the planet itself.

Last year, when the United Reformed Church's Synod of Scotland debated disinvesting from fossil fuel companies (which it did), questions were asked, both during the debate and afterwards, as to how people who had turned up to a meeting by car could, without hypocrisy, vote to disinvest from BP and Shell. I

imagine similar sorts of questions were levelled at Lydia over simultaneously owning slaves and commending this new-fangled following-Jesus-religion that threatened slave owners.

But since we've mentioned Jesus, here comes slave number three. Saint Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, writing to a congregation which maybe included a slave girl, and which certainly included those who remembered her, says this: 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, **taking the form of a slave**, being born in human likeness' (2:5-7). Yes, Jesus is the third one in this tale of three slaves; a slave even to the point of suffering the form of execution often used against troublesome slaves: 'death on a cross (2:8).

But Jesus is a strange sort of slave. He **chooses** this status, which is not how it usually work for slaves either then or now. In the previous sermon we heard Paul tell the Philippians to be of the 'same mind', to have the same "mind-set"; a perspective on the world modelled on having the mind of Christ Jesus. Now, Paul tells them that Jesus' approach is to consciously put aside godly status, to be a slave, so putting the interests of others so far ahead of his own that he is prepared to die for them.

If this is our model for having Christian a mind-set what might it lead us to do in practice? Some people think that these verses are only about following the example of Jesus in how we lead our own individual lives or our shared life within the church. I don't think that can be the whole story.

God, Paul also tells us, responds to Jesus' approach by exalting Jesus, 'giving him the name above every name' (2:9) – "Lord" - which in turn gives us Jesus as one who chooses slavery and yet as a result ends up being the Lord and Master; one to whom every knee bends 'in heaven and on earth and under the earth' (2:10); or to put it another way, Lord and Master across the whole of creation.

Following Jesus by having a Jesus-mind-set that puts the interests of others ahead of self, also involves following Jesus who is the slave-like, humble Lord of creation. So, I believe, our way of following Jesus has to affect our way of living within that creation where he is "Lord". And that way of living, in imitation of Jesus' approach to life on earth, is a humble one, considering the needs of others first.

To do that, however, puts us in tension or even conflict with a lot of the values and aspirations of the culture, economy and society within which we live, from which we have benefitted, and in which we are all thoroughly involved – some might even say, “implicated”. Why have we, humankind, at this time so thoroughly exalted above all others this one way of organising our economic life?

This isn't about capitalism as such. It is about **any** economic or other system we put in place which is supposed to serve the interests of humankind but instead becomes our lord and master: how many times have you found yourself in a conversation with a worker at the other of a telephone and they are saying something like, “I see what you want to happen and it makes sense but the system won't let me do it”.

How is it that when Jesus chooses to live life on earth on the basis of choosing to make do with less than that which is available to him – equality with God - we as a society struggle to live life without burning more and more fossil fuels, to the detriment of ourselves, others and future generations. Where, Saint Paul might ask, is our Jesus-mind-set?

And where, in any case, did we get the idea that we could simply lord it over creation, careless of the impact of our decisions on the fabric of the planet. After all, God the creator – God the Father as Paul puts it – exalts **Jesus**, the volunteer slave, as the one appropriate to be Lord over creation, not us.

If, in solidarity with Paul, that slave of Christ Jesus, and with an unnamed slave girl, and with those Philippian Christians, including the slave owner, Lydia, we let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus, we would become much more sensitised to the challenges facing this part of creation. I also think we might get a bit uncomfortable about how we are entangled in some of the attitudes, actions and systems that generate the present problems of the world.

No wonder Paul says, in the concluding verses of this section of his letter, ‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’ (2:12). We cannot calculate with certainty the impact of our personal actions within such huge, complex, interlocking social, political and economic systems, any more than Lydia could calculate with certainty what following Jesus would mean for slave owning.

What we do say is that a Christian mind-set is a good place from which to start in making such judgments. Look to the humble, slave-like Jesus as the Lord of

creation. Exalt Jesus-like humility above unrealistic claims of economic systems that are supposed to function as servants, not masters. Be ready to make do with less, to make do with enough, for the sake of others, just as Jesus was ready to give up everything for the sake of others, including you and me.

If that sounds like a frightening agenda that's because it is a frightening agenda! Take heart; Paul's final word today is not only 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling' but also, 'for it is God who is at work in you enabling you both to will and work for his good pleasure' (2:13).