

The Seventh Sunday of Easter, 1 June 2025

Readings: Acts 16.16-34, Psalm 97, Revelation 22.12-14, 16-17, 20-21, John 17.20-26

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.** (Psalm 19.14)

During Eastertide we have listened to episodes from the Acts of the Apostles, seven in all. Many leave us puzzled, as we are inducted into a world other than our own. We only need to look to today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles or to next Sunday's reading, Pentecost, when we will hear the episode of the first outpouring of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Acts a book soaked in the workings of the Holy Spirit. What might our everyday look like if there were a little more Holy Spirit?

Before we proceed, a thought and an invitation. The days between Ascension Day and Pentecost, an in-between time, afford us an opportunity to prepare ourselves to receive the Holy Spirit anew as captured in the Ascensiontide prayer, "Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people." You might like to think of these ten days as a mini-Lent filling them with prayers and the singing of hymns to God inspired by today's Acts reading in which we see Paul and Silas doing precisely that, praying and singing hymns to God while the other prisoners listen in. Paul will write to the Church in Philippi in which today's episode takes place,

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Philippians 4:6)

The readings from the Book of Acts we have heard over the last weeks instruct us in the beginnings of the Church, urging us as Christians, as those who believe in the Lord Jesus, to be the one who saves us from sin and death and ourselves, to write the next chapter of the Acts of the Apostles in our generation. The jailer in today's reading asks Paul and Silas, after assuring himself that they have not fled, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas reply in one voice inviting us to do the same today, if asked, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved— you and your household!"

No doubt today's Acts reading is a strange story for us moderns. Earthquakes are not uncommon occurrences. The earth is not only spinning around itself, but the tectonic plates are shifting as I speak and, for the most part, thank goodness, imperceptibly. An earthquake is not what is remarkable, but rather first and foremost how the Apostles react to their imprisonment. Rather than be downhearted given the flogging they received and their predicament, they pray and sing hymns to God. They have not lost heart in the face of adversity. Their trust remains in God, unshaken. The other prisoners as already noted, listen to their prayers and hymns. Do Paul and Silas's prayers, their hymns, and their faith bring comfort as well as assurance? The reading suggests yes. Be joyful for Christians are gathering today the world over to sing psalms and hymns and to pray.

More remarkable for most, rather than the Apostles' composure in the face of adversity based on believing in the Lord Jesus, is that when the opportunity arises for them to escape, an escape made possible by the earthquake, Paul, Silas, and the other prisoners stay put. They do not flee. The calmness of the Apostles contrasts with the panic-stricken jailer, contemplating suicide, fearing as he does that the prisoners the Roman authorities have entrusted to him for safekeeping will have used the opportunity afforded to escape. Instead, he hears Paul say, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

It is a clever device to use a prison and the profession of a jailer to speak about salvation and being saved. To be saved is to be set free, set free to live in God and for God. Again, we must turn to Paul to understand this. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5.1) We can also turn to the Book of Common Prayer and the second Collect set for Morning Prayer, the Collect of Peace, "O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom."

In the setting of imprisonment, a jail, the question is asked and it will be asked again and again down the centuries and by people gathered here today, "What must I do to be saved?" "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved! You and your household!" The setting is not incidental, but rather it is subtly asking us in our present places of imprisonments, of which we are often jailers of our own making, by the choices we make, the fads we follow, while speaking exponentially of freedom, when we are unfree having tethered ourselves to this or that ideology, it is asking us to what extent are we imprisoned and what we have chained ourselves to by the choices we make. Or how we have allowed ourselves to be changed to by others. Words from the confession at Morning and Evening Prayer from the 16th century do not lose their force even when we wish they did, "We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws."

Things are not as they seem from a faith perspective for a people who put themselves under God's sovereignty, who rules over all things. On Thursday, the Church celebrated the Feast of the Ascension, Christ's going up, as we say, using spatial imagery. On the day, we reminded ourselves of how the Lord Jesus

"left this earth and returned to his Father, ascending into heaven to take his throne over all dominions and powers. Trusting in his reign over all creation, and submitting to his kingly yet loving rule,"

we recalled the story of his parting.

The sovereignty of God, sovereignty in German being *Hoheit*, or *Souveränität*, leads us who believe in Jesus as Lord and Saviour to put our trust in God, who has made Himself known to us as love. Put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee...

Recently, I have been compelled to consider holding a service of Wholeness of Healing with the laying of hands. During the service of Wholeness and Healing, the priest prays, invoking the name of God:

In the name of God and trusting in his might alone,

receive Christ's healing touch to make you whole.

May Christ bring you wholeness
of body, mind, and spirit,
deliver you from every evil,
and give you his peace. **Amen.**

It is the phrase "trusting in his might alone", in his power alone, I want to underline from that prayer for wholeness and healing in the context of today's service. The Old and the New Testament both invite and enable us through the working of the Holy Spirit to bring ourselves to a place in our lives by drawing us close to the Father's heart, where true joys are to be found, as articulated in Psalm 16:

"You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." (Psalm 16.11)

In conclusion, given the material above, there are a few things to reiterate. How will we prepare ourselves for our keeping of Pentecost?

Shall we do so by fasting and prayer, or by the singing of hymns and psalms and prayers with thanksgiving given he is risen from the tomb, given "Er sitzt zur rechten Gottes"? He sits at God's right hand. One simply prayer will suffice, "Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people."

What are things of this world that we have allowed ourselves to be imprisoned to in our forsaking of God, as we follow too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, mistaking these devices and desires as being of God? It is a call to self-examination, to total honesty with ourselves and to repentance.

Each is asked to review how they are contributing to writing to the next chapter of the Acts of the Apostles and how we may be hindering the writing of the same.

For me, the highlight of this exposition is the calmness with which the Apostles, Paul and Silas, face adversity. How they do not lose heart. How, turning to God, they do so with prayers and the singing of hymns. How they do not put the jailer in mortal

danger. Rather than lose heart, they remain focussed on the God who saves, who saves from sin and death, and to a life that is always more abundant than we can hope for left to our own devices, for in your service is perfect freedom and in your presence is the fullness of joy. **Amen. Amen.**