

## St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2019

### Communion

*Acts 16: 16 - 34*

'Leavers and Remainers don't agree about much. But there is one point about Brexit that seems to unite them: the notion that the whole process has turned into a ghastly national humiliation.'<sup>1</sup> These aren't my words, but the words of Gideon Rachman, chief foreign affairs commentator on the Financial Times, about a month ago.

'Leavers and Remainers don't agree about much,' he wrote, 'But there is one point about Brexit that seems to unite them: the notion that the whole process has turned into a ghastly national humiliation.'

Everyone agrees that this is a national humiliation, argues Mr Rachman, but in the article that he wrote for the Financial Times he notes that, strangely, he doesn't feel humiliated, and that there is no reason for anyone to feel humiliated. What's more, this sense of national humiliation is actually unnecessary and dangerous.

Humiliation is an emotion, he notes, not an objective fact. Countries that decide they have been humiliated are often dangerous to others and to themselves, like Putin's Russia, and the Chinese Communist Party's carefully constructed "century of humiliation" that it uses to justify one-party rule. He argues that when countries nourish a sense of national humiliation, that often leads to an ugly atmosphere of revenge against foreigners or domestic traitors who are alleged to have afflicted this terrible fate upon the nation.

We should snap out of it, says Mr Rachman. Humiliation is a feeling, and a dangerous one. We don't have to feel humiliated, he says. It is possible to see Brexit differently, from another perspective. Most people around the world aren't laughing at us, in fact they never think of Brexit. Britain to them means the Queen, Harry Potter and Manchester United. Even at its worst, Brexit could never feel as humiliating as, for example, defeat in war, the collapse of democracy, or occupation by a foreign power, all of which have been experienced by other EU countries in their recent histories. Compared to those scenarios, Brexit is nothing.

We need to see our situation differently; we need to understand what is happening from a different point of view. As a nation we need liberating from what is beginning to look like an oppressive spirituality of national humiliation.

This idea that people, individually or collectively, might need liberated from forces that have physical and spiritual power - the very real referendum, for example, or the very strong feelings of humiliation - runs right through our Bible reading this morning. The story, which involves spiritual battles, a miracle, and conversions to the faith, is in its essence a story about liberation from oppressive forces, both physical and spiritual, in people's lives.

At the beginning of the story a woman needs liberation. She is being manipulated, '...a slave girl [who] was possessed by a spirit and brought large profits to her owners for telling fortunes.'<sup>2</sup> Later in the story Paul and Silas are in need of liberation after they are thrown in to prison. The jailer needs liberation from his code of honour that means he has to kill himself when things go wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/0f4e3256-610f-11e9-a27a-fdd51850994c>

<sup>2</sup> Acts 16: 16

Paul and Silas address these situations by addressing the immediate needs of those individuals directly affected: the slave-girl and the jailer. When the prison doors are burst open the jailer pleads to know how he (and by extension his family) might be saved – not sometime in the future or after his death, but in the here and now, immediately.

This need for liberation from what imprisons the slave-girl and the jailer contrasts directly with the experience of Paul and Silas – and by extension their community in prison, the other prisoners. Although Paul and Silas are imprisoned, and in need of liberation, when the doors burst open, they don't run away, they don't free themselves, they stay put. The implication is that although they have been imprisoned, nevertheless they are free. They are liberated by their faith no matter their physical situation. Paul and Silas are always and forever spiritually free, liberated, saved.

The other prisoners don't run away either, they too stay put, and the implication is that they had been converted by Paul and Silas' singing during the night, '...Paul and Silas, at their prayers, were singing praises to God, and the other prisoners were listening...',<sup>3</sup> and so they too are free, spiritually, even though they are in prison.

For those first Christians, like Paul and Silas, and for those who encountered them as they toured around the Mediterranean preaching the Gospel, Christianity was a faith that liberated. It liberated in a way that allowed people to see themselves and the world from a completely different perspective.

The disciples of Jesus who had first experienced his resurrection appearances had been liberated from the power that death held over Jesus' life, ministry and teaching. It had liberated them from the power that Rome and religion held over them, so that they could see, feel and understand themselves and the world around them in a direct relationship with God who, as Jesus had showed them, wanted them to know that they were loved, that they could live at peace, that there was justice in the world, but also mercy.

This was how the first disciples, and then the first Christians like Paul and Silas, understood their faith. Salvation was liberation. Once people saw the world as followers of Jesus Christ in a loving relationship with God, they were no longer afraid of the powers of the world, or even of death. The first disciples were set free, the slave-girl was set free, the jailer was set free, and even the prisoners were set free in such a way they didn't even need to leave prison to feel free.

We, as a nation, you and I, do not need to feel humiliated. How we behave in this country at this time, or how we feel about politics or ourselves just now, does not need to be dictated by how we think we should feel, or how others think we should feel. We can reframe our feelings, see them from a different angle, use a longer perspective. There are ways to liberate ourselves spiritually from Brexit.

And, what's more, our spiritual liberation doesn't just affect us. In the passage we read, we discover that when one person is spiritually liberated from the way they understand themselves and their place in the world, everyone around them is affected as well.

When the slave-girl experienced liberation, her owners' world was also turned upside down. When Paul and Silas expressed their liberation through song and prayer in prison, the other prisoners experienced that liberation. When the jailer was liberated from his honour, which required suicide, his whole family experienced liberation.

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 16: 25

The good news of Jesus Christ that Paul and Silas sang about, prayed about, preached about in that prison was something that transformed people's lives. It gave people a new perspective on life, with a renewed sense of worth and value. They felt loved. They no longer felt they needed to worry about those who controlled their lives, as in the slave-girl's case, or those who expected them to be humiliated by dishonour, as in the jailer's case, or those who imprisoned them, as in the prisoners' case.

The Gospel can liberate you too, spiritually. And when it does, those around you will also feel that sense of liberation. When we share communion later, we do so together as a community of people spiritually liberated from the spiritual power that this world holds over us, so that we can live in the knowledge that together we are the body of Christ, members of his church, people who are loved, who live in peace, who demand justice, and who expect to see mercy.

I was a commissioner at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland this week. At the General Assembly over 600 members of the Church gather to discuss the important issues of the day. As always one of the issues involves the place of the church in Scottish society – a church that has a declining membership and less and less influence. Yet, as commissioners, we were encouraged when the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, addressed the Assembly and reminded us that we still had a place in Scottish society, even if we struggle sometimes to see it ourselves.

In a sense, I suppose, the Church of Scotland feels imprisoned spiritually in Scotland today; imprisoned by secular culture that is at best indifferent towards religion in general and the Church specifically. If we do feel worried or anxious about that, we shouldn't be. As Paul and Silas demonstrate in this reading, we can still be free even if we are in prison. Even behind the spiritual bars of secular culture our faith in Jesus Christ lives and breathes, and with a holiness of spirit reaches out in to the world to transform and liberate it.

Your faith in God, and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is no small thing. When you live it, it affects people and changes the world around you in ways you may never know about. So, take heart, when we celebrate communion together, this matters, this works. When the jailer asked Paul and Silas, "... what must I do to be saved?" They said, "Put your trust in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."