



Sermon Acts 16.16-34

Last weekend many of us were away in Begues... thanks to Brenda for leading the service here... our services were a bit different because I'd lost my voice... just about back now, so watch out!

? Relevance of St P's Missionary Journeys to us, today?

1. Part of OUR story
2. A pattern for the Church to follow today??

Most would say "no" because SOCIETY is too different (eg transport, communication, nation states, political correctness).

Also because position of the CHURCH is too different...

Then we were fresh, new, growing, dynamic...
Now old, tired, declining (?)

Also, PAUL is implicated in the Church's unpopularity in liberal society – seen as intolerant, dogmatic, authoritarian.

I CONCEDE THAT we aren't going to be able to do things exactly the way Paul and his friends did, BUT we can still learn some vital principles and qualities from them.

1. PATIENCE

The fortune telling slave girl was clearly demon possessed (repetition, tone, use of title "MHG"), yet it was "many days" before Paul took action. This in turn led to P & S being misunderstood, beaten and imprisoned without trial or justification... How did they react? By calmly praying and singing hymns through the night, so that other prisoners could hear them. They patiently waited for God to set them free, which he did eventually.

Q How patient are we, especially when dealing with people we find difficult, or when waiting for a wrong against us to be put right?

My impression is that we live in an impatient age, an impatient society and that our impatience is limiting the extent to which God can work through us. Last weekend Ann Morisy said we need to be aware of the flows of people in our neighbourhoods? Who are they? What are their physical and spiritual needs? To find out we will need to be prayerful, observant and PATIENT – patient because it can take time for patterns to emerge and for us to be aware of what is really happening..

2. FLEXIBILITY

We will also need to be flexible, just as throughout this second missionary journey Paul & Co showed great flexibility to changing circumstances, local conditions and the promptings and corrections of the Holy Spirit. St P was not the great Mission Strategist he is



sometimes portrayed as, he was just obedient STEP BY STEP to the Holy Spirit and sensitive to the people he was amongst, and their context.

But flexibility is not just about having awareness, it is about bending and stretching and being able to change direction quickly in response to a change in circumstances or new information. Big organisations don't tend to do flexibility very well – too rigid and rule-bound to change quickly.

At St George's we are a small part of a very large organisation. Flexibility is not something that churches are generally known for, but at our local level it is essential that we retain the flexibility to change direction quickly, responding to the Spirit's promptings or to new opportunities to share the Gospel in words and action.

Q How flexible are we as individuals and as a church, in the way we plan our time and use our resources?

We are not necessarily talking about big things – it can be as easy as setting off a little earlier on journeys so that we have time to notice what is happening around us and to stop for a conversation or to give practical help.

OR taking 10 minutes to listen to a colleague at work, even if it means you stay a bit later at the end of the day.

Billie and I got help and directions from a stranger in USA last summer, without asking. He just saw us reading a map!

OR thinking about how those who've been here a while can help new expats get to know the system. Maybe we could have a frequently asked questions section on our website or have information sharing mornings?

Ann Morisy talked about the effectiveness of "small, light, well-directed actions" in communicating the gospel. A flexible Christian and a flexible Church can do this (eg...)

3. VISION

...by which I mean THE ABILITY TO SEE BEYOND THE OBVIOUS. Think how our story began. Slave girl – P's irritation – exorcism – arrest, beating, imprisonment – praise and prayer in prison ... THEN the earthquake, freedom from chains and bars and what next?... run away and celebrate victory of God's servants over their enemies??? NO, P & S stay put, reassure the gaoler and save him from suicide, with result that he and all his household become believers and are baptized (*there is another twist in the story before the end of chapter but that is for another time!*).

The fact that P & S didn't snatch at the obvious answer to prayer and stayed put, in the prison, in the darkness, resulted in a far greater harvest!

This can be seen as the difference between the religion of the OT (all about God's people being freed from captivity to be separate and holy to him) ... and the NT, which goes beyond. We are set free to STAY amidst the darkness and TRANSFORM it. God's aim is



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to transform society and win over his enemies through the way Christians live amongst their neighbours!

A turn -around like the one in our story can only be achieved by God. The grace and mystery and scope of salvation are truly amazing! The patience and flexibility of the apostles are exemplary!

The way God works to further the gospel is beyond any human strategy but he needs us to be involved in his mission. We need strong foundations in our prayer life, our understanding of the Bible and our awareness of the Holy Spirit. We also need the qualities which Paul and Silas show in this amazing story.

DO WE have Paul and Silas's vision, their ability to see beyond the obvious?

Do we have their patience and flexibility?

Do we have the faith and the guts to let God use us in this way, to continue transforming human society from within?