God sets us free

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Pentecost + 2: 1 K 19, Pss 42 & 3, Gal 3, Lk 8

Have you ever been to prison? Inside a prison? Has your life ever felt like a prison? Have your mind or your heart ever felt like *they’d* locked you up – or locked you out? It’s a dreadful experience; nowhere to turn; no choices; depressed; no hope; no feelings, really; hard even to imagine joy. We don’t have to be in a physical gaol; chronically sick people often feel trapped and depressed; people in trouble – people who’ve suffered abuse know imprisonment too; trapped; sad; hopeless.

This is an experience of bars and locked doors which are invisible to others. Many of us know people who suffer this way. Something deep inside locks our friends away from hope and happiness – from us. In our readings today, we meet people trapped in these interior prisons. They also show God breaking these gaols open to free the poor prisoners. It’s important that we think about this because of our parish’s special mission to people who are locked out and homeless. What are you and I called to do?

The first prisoner we meet today is Elijah. His gaol is fear. The furious Queen Jezebel had vowed to make his ‘life like that of one of her [false] prophets’. Elijah flees in terror from her fury; even death in the wilderness would be better. Then God sends an Angel to minister to Elijah in his prison of fear. The Angel feeds Elijah so he’s strong enough to travel to Mount Sinai. And there, where God was once present to Moses, the Lord also blesses Elijah with the healing gift of his presence in the sound of sheer silence – what our old Bibles used to call *the still small voice*.

God’s presence for Elijah comes in the form of food, a

journey, and finally, an inner peace; the silent peace of God, deep inside him. And in the strength of that beautiful silent peace, Elijah finds the will to go on with his remarkable ministry.

Food, a journey, and an inner peace; people have always sought that peace – that silent peace. We still do so today; we still meet God in this beautiful, liberating divine silence. If you want to explore this, then I suggest you talk with Lynne about our parish's Thursday-afternoon Centring Prayer gatherings.

Elijah's experience of peace in the silence is the same peace that God gives to the Psalmist. But this time, it comes to heal a different predicament. The Psalmist is crushed beneath a burden of inner noise. *Why are you so full of heaviness, my soul and why so unquiet within me?*

This time, God comes to the Psalmist from an earlier time in life; through memories of healing, lightness and peace. The Psalmist had met God in these experiences before and so now trust that it's possible to meet the Lord in them again. God can bring peace from our past. The Psalmist prays: [43.3] *send out your light and your truth, and let them lead me: then I shall go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight; … and to the harp, I shall sing your praises, O God, my God.* So God's light and healing release this prisoner too. God gives the same peace, and this time the silence opens the way to joyous relief; God's peace gives voice to songs of praise.

The next prisoner we meet is not an individual, but rather groups of people in the first Christian communities of Galatia. The prison bars and locked doors that Paul talks about in Galatians 3 are still to be found inside people everywhere. These are the bars, the locked doors and glass ceilings and the utter blindness of prejudice; the social barriers we people put up between ourselves and others; barriers we defend fiercely. Like Elijah did, Paul speaks the Lord's mind at great personal risk – speaks it into a society

that is predicated on a few people excluding and controlling all the others on the basis of their race, on the basis of their social standing – are they are slaves or free people – and on the basis of whether they are male or female.

Just as we saw God set Elijah and the Psalmist free from their prisons, now Paul sees Christ at work calling us to declare why he came; to set all his children free. He challenges the Galatians, and he challenges us, to make right choices. And the choice before the Galatians then, as it is for us now, is whether to accept social conventions that restrict and separate and imprison on the basis of race, gender or social position, or to believe that Jesus wants everyone set free from those restrictions and divisions.

In this case, God comes calling us to exercise free choice; to recognise God's passion for everyone to be free, and so to choose to free ourselves and each other. Again, the prison has bars and locked doors that we can't see. Again God breaks in, offering us healing and peace. This choice thing might all seem distant and theoretical. What about when we don't have choices? What about people who are beyond all hope, beyond all help; in places where they are overcome by evil. What does God do then?

We see Jesus today going to just such a person in just such a place. Jesus and his friends get out of their boat in unclean territory – opposite Galilee. There, a naked lunatic confronts them. He lives in a graveyard and he's infested by thousands of unclean spirits. No-one wants to go to such a place; no-one wants to confront such a dangerous person; a man possessed. Do we fear people so disturbed?

Maybe. But in goes Jesus to confront the demons; to name them and to cast them out. We might be uncomfortable with notions of demons and evil. But if you think of the types of evil that we see in our community, maybe they're not so very alien. Think of the evil that imprisons identifiable groups of people

in our own time; imprisons them in inter-generational poverty and poor health; in slavery to addictions, in cycles of ignorance; that muzzles them in secrecy and hides them away from scrutiny.

The demons that imprison people in this city – in their addictions to alcohol, drugs and gambling that imprison people in loneliness and ruined health – are often, in their turn, the result of other people's addictions to the money and power that lie behind it all. The demons that lock people into cycles of poverty and disease – cycles that span generations – are the perennial demons of addiction to power and prestige which blind and deafen people to the needs of God's little ones. So these primary and secondary addictions are prisons both for inmates and their gaolers.

Today, we've seen very clearly God's response to such prisons. Ours is to pray that God breaks in and sets people free. But be warned; as God's people, it's our calling to become God's answer to the prayers we offer. Are we willing? Amen.