

Acts 16.16-34; Revelation 22.12-14,16-17,20-21; John 17.20-26

Occasionally I get the chance to hear the programme Great Lives on Radio 4. This week it profiled a woman I had never heard of - Asma Jangir - a female Pakistani human rights lawyer who died last year. Asma came to prominence during the time of President Zia Al Huq. He introduced laws which reduced the value of a woman's testimony to half that of a man, as well as the Haddood Ordinances, where victims of rape had to prove their innocence or face punishment themselves. In 1983, Safia Bibi, a blind girl who was aged just thirteen was raped by her employers but was herself sentenced to flogging, a fine and three years imprisonment. Asma successfully defended her but in doing so put her own life in danger. As well as women, Asma has represented people held in bonded labour and members of religious minorities. In 1995 she successfully defended a fourteen year old Christian boy against a charge of blasphemy. During her career Asma upset Pakistan's military rulers, its religious conservatives, big business and even the media. She has endured tear gas, assaults, death threats and even imprisonment. But she seems to have had no fear and was utterly convinced of her battle for justice.

As I listened to Asma's story it reminded me of St Paul and today's reading from Acts. As we heard, Paul cast out a spirit of divination from a young slave girl. She was being exploited by her owners and when Paul cast out the spirit she became worthless to them. Paul's ministry had affected their business and they wanted revenge. They had Paul and Silas thrown into prison. Upsetting powerful interests can be dangerous but we need brave people like Paul and Asma who are prepared to take risks in order to liberate others.

It is estimated that today over 40 million people are trapped in some form of slavery worldwide. Roughly 136,000 of those people are believed to be in this country. Last year 7000 victims of modern slavery were found by the police and charities. Some slaves are domestic workers kept behind locked doors. Others are involved in the sex industry. But many more are working in manufacturing, entertainment, travel, farming, and construction industries. Some work in nail bars and car washes. Recently the Church of England launched an app which allows people to report situations where they think people may be the victim of modern slavery. We are encouraged to look out for workers who seem fearful, lack proper protection or training or who appear to live on the premises. The good news of Jesus Christ is about liberation from all sorts of slavery and we can all play our part in setting others free.

In the Great Lives programme, Asma Jangir's daughter, herself a lawyer, talked about the many times her mother had been put in prison. She had asked her mother what it was like and surprisingly, Asma had said she had enjoyed herself behind bars. She had spent time with people she was close to and they had used their incarceration to debate and plan their next moves. Paul and Silas had a similarly upbeat approach attitude to their incarceration. They spent the night praying and singing hymns which the other prisoners listened to. Suddenly, in an echo of the resurrection, an earthquake shook the prison and they were set free. It was a vivid illustration of the power of prayer, something we are encouraged to do more of in these days between Ascension and Pentecost. All of us will know people who need to be set free in some way. And as part of Thy Kingdom Come we can use these days to pray that those people may know more of God's liberating love.

And we may find that our prayers change not just other people but ourselves. We may discover the confidence to share something of our Christian faith with those we know. We may find an opportunity to say something or invite someone to something that we wouldn't have done before. And through our prayers we may discover more of what it means to be in Christ that our Gospel talks about.

The liberation described in our reading from Acts is of a different order to any other. In the judicial process there must be losers as well as winners but in today's story even Paul's jailer is set free. In those days, jailers were often freelance. They were the G4S of their day. And if their prisoner escaped the jailer could expect a harsh punishment. When he realised that his prisoners were free the jailer was about to end his own life but Paul managed to stop him. Although there was nothing to prevent them escaping, all of the prisoners had remained in their cells. The jailer was overwhelmed by this and he recognised his own need to be saved. He and all his household were baptised. We don't know if he remained a jailer but in Christ he discovered a new freedom. He was born again. Saved.

This liberating power which liberates both slaves and slavers, prisoners and jailers, is the Holy Spirit. The part of God that breaks down barriers, makes connections and leads people to the truth. The Spirit empowers the powerless and challenges the status quo, always prompting people to move on and embrace a bigger picture of God's kingdom. Sometimes the Spirit is as gentle as a breath. At other times the Spirit comes as a roaring wind or an earthquake, shaking foundations and breaking chains.

The Spirit blows where it wills. He or she is unpredictable, impossible to control and yet the Spirit brings life. Life in all its fulness. During these days between Ascension and Pentecost we are called to pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit. In our lives, in the lives of those we know and in the life of the church. In the coming week we join with Christians around the world and pray, come Holy Spirit and fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.