

St Brandon's, Sermon for 29th May 2022.

Acts 16:16-34, John 17:20-end

Miracles and in-dwelling

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A prelude directed at any scholars present: It seems opinion is divided among scholars as to how 'unadorned' the accounts are of the 'Acts of the Apostles'. I had always read them as a sort of 'journal' of what happened to the twelve disciples - the events that followed immediately on from the death of Christ - and that has always been the tradition. Certainly, they are viewed by all scholars as the historical source for understanding how the early church developed, and the events that happened in the gap between where the gospels finish and Paul's letters to the first churches are written. Well, whether the miraculous freeing from prison actually happened quite like this or not, I'm going to treat it as if it did. And I'll justify that by adding that if there was adornment of the story, it would have been to promote understanding of the Christian message: 'to teach lessons via thrilling adventures and captivating tales'.

I wonder what you make of this wonderful escape story?

Did God throw off their chains? Is this a miracle story? Or 'only' a story?

Or is it the sort of amazing event that fits in those 'special times' of the bible but would be unbelievable nowadays?

Oxford dictionaries define a miracle as, '*an extraordinary and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore attributed to a divine agency.*'

Sounds okay? And sounds like something I would expect to still be happening, if we believe divine agencies to still be at work in our world.

Putting aside the amazing stories we hear third hand, what might modest miracles look like in our own lives? Small, modest miracles that might really happen to us?

I think there are patters and pointers in today's readings that might help us see our own miracles better. So let's return to our heroes, Paul and Silas, in the most secure cell of the prison.

Suddenly, and thrillingly, they are set free by doors flying open and chains unfastening themselves. Credible?

This does happen in the immediate wake of a sudden earthquake.

And an earthquake is a natural occurrence.

I don't know how frequent earthquakes occur for them, but this is very fortuitous timing!

Perhaps the earthquake does some loosening? Perhaps, with some explainable or unexplainable help – maybe help from each other? - that initial loosening enables every one of the prisoners to come free.

Now, if I'm sounding cynical, it's only because I want to emphasise the next part.

Wouldn't it be logical for all the prisoners to do a runner as soon as they see they can simply head through an open door and away into the night? Wouldn't panic and confusion lead them to automatic flight? And if they had all run out, I expect a number would have been recaptured or killed, or at least have to hide, or escape to somewhere safe, as now they would be 'wanted men', on the run?

Had they all done a runner, God would have met them where they went, and the story would have continued, but differently. And would it have still looked like a miracle?

To me, the heart of the miracle is not the earthquake and loosening of chains but the way Paul and Silas behave. This starts with the extraordinary way the two disciples have been leading prayers and singing: joyous worship in the face of detainment in a high security jail, seemingly as witness to the other prisoners, who were listening to them.

And then the extraordinary decision to stay put!

Including persuading every other prisoner to stay with them!

And what sort of calm assurance must have possessed Paul, that he had the insight, and presence of mind to shout out to the jailer as he heard his fumbling approach, and his sword being unsheathed?

How did Paul jump to the conclusion that the jailer's sword was a threat to the jailer, not to himself?

And why should Paul have had such concern and compassion for the jailer, anyway?

Perhaps this is the real miracle: the quality of heart, mind and soul with which Paul acts, showing love for all, when every instinct in the room would have been fear.

The power of that love that could dispel all fear, and operate with its own alternative logic, so impresses the jailer that he asks how he can have that saving power. Hearing the Word, the jailer's heart is touched, and he returns compassionate care by washing the wounds from their earlier, cruel beating.

With minds and hearts opened by the Good News of Jesus, he and his household receive the Holy Spirit in baptism, and rejoice!

To expand on the mystery of Paul's ability to act as he did, in the face of all defeat, let's turn to today's passage from John's gospel. These are the closing words of a very long dialogue that follows the foot-washing and Judas' departure: a series of instructions to the remaining eleven disciples, and assurances that culminate in prayer; immediately the prayer is ended he sets out for the garden of Gethsemane.

In this final prayer, Jesus is praying for us, here today: we are the ones who believe in Jesus through the word as told, down the centuries.

And Jesus is praying that we may be allowed to be IN the Father in the same way that Jesus knows himself to be IN the Father.

That this would come about through Jesus being IN us, and already having the Father IN him.
(*"I in them and thou in me."*)

If granted, this would reveal the truth about Jesus, and the Father's love for him and us.

The truth that God is revealed to the world in the life and work of Jesus, and, in turn, Jesus is revealed to the world through the witness and actions of his followers down the centuries, starting with the disciples. Foremost among the disciples, being Paul, who only met Jesus in his blinding vision on the road to Damascus but who went on to reveal the greater mysteries of the working of Christ IN us, building us into his body, his temple. Making us fellow-workers with Christ.

The reason Paul could respond with such miraculously gracious actions in the prison was because the promised Holy Spirit had come, and was in-dwelling him: *"I in them and thou in me."* God, having used the opportunity of the earthquake to loosen chains, was reliant on the freely and faithfully tuned Paul, to be tuned into the place where the Holy Spirit dwelt IN him; to recognise the movement of the Holy Spirit IN himself, and to choose to respond with obedience to the Holy Spirit. In other words, Paul operating with the grace of God: *"I in them and thou in me."*

I started this by asking “what might modest miracles look like in our own lives?”

I would like to suggest it is when we find we have transformed a situation by responding to that situation not from a place of our own strength for fight or flight, but from attention and obedience to our place of the in-dwelling Holy Spirit. It is likely then to be characterised not by fear but by love, and the improbable choices love makes, to save others, and in doing so, to save us, too.

Those improbable choices love makes when “*I in them and thou in me*”, is in charge, appear as little miracles: *not explicable ... therefore attributed to a divine agency.*’

Let me illustrate this with an example from my own experience.

I still remember how, as a young, and tired mother, my toddler was winding me up badly. I slumped to the floor and asked God to not let me lose my temper. A moment later, I was on my feet and at snapping point, I opened my mouth to let rip, only to find the sentences being changed in my mouth: words of moderation and kindness that I barely recognised.

The experience impressed me deeply as I really did not feel it had been in my power to do that, that some other was doing it for me.

The miracle was IN me, just as the miracle was IN Paul.

“*I in them and thou in me*”, was in charge, making the improbable choices love makes to save others, and in doing so, to save us, too.

As we wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentacost, let pray:

“Come, Holy Spirit, deeper into our beings, that we may more fully live in you, and you in us, as we go about our extraordinary, ordinary lives”

Amen