

At Easter we had a robin in the church. We opened the doors but it was panicked and flying high up, back and forwards. Eventually we made a concerted effort with people in the balcony and downstairs to coax it toward the door, and eventually it found the open door and flew out. I have no idea whether robins can experience relief, but I was pleased. It had been so desperate to escape.

Contrast that with our cat when I take it to a basket to the vet. It will point blank refuse to get out of its basket and I almost have to shake it out – it knows it is probably safer inside than out.

If we were in prison, we might both long to escape like the robin, but also, depending upon the circumstances, know that if we did escape, life might then become very dangerous indeed. To be caught attempting to escape from jail in 1st century Judea, would undoubtedly bring about extremely harsh punishment, but only if you were caught.

In the aftermath of an earthquake, the probability of being caught would be very much reduced.

Paul and Silas were imprisoned because they had stopped a young girl from fortune-telling and her owners were angry at the loss of income. The crowd had turned upon Paul and Silas and they had been stripped, beaten and flung into prison.

To be in prison is awful. To be in the innermost cell, naked, with your feet shackled in prison in 1st century Judea, would have been unbelievably foul. Dark, damp, filthy, stinking, with lice, fleas, rats. You can let your imagination run riot and it still probably would not come close to the truth.

Paul and Silas, instead of raging against the injustice of it all, or succumbing to despair, they prayed and sang psalms.

And the other prisoners listened.

And then the earthquake.

If by some miracle an earthquake undid the shackles so that you could move, and destroyed the walls, even if you didn't escape completely, surely you would move towards the light.

But when all were unshackled, not one of them staggered off to escape.

'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.'

This is what Paul shouted to the jailer who was about to kill himself. It is remarkable on several counts.

First because Paul is so concerned for his jailer.

‘We are all here.’

Each one of those desperate prisoners had stayed with Paul and Silas.

We know nothing about them, nothing about their crimes or how long they had been in prison. But we can guess at their despair, and from that short phrase, ‘and the prisoners were listening to them’ we can perhaps begin to comprehend how this sudden unexpected outpouring of praise and joy infected them with hope. Here were two naked and bloody prisoners, come to join their ghastly ranks, and yet these two behaved as no other prisoners had done. They sang. They prayed.

And when presented with a choice, these prisoners chose to stay with Paul and Silas who had given them hope. At last they understood that freedom was not really about having the shackles removed, or being let out of a cell, freedom was about inhabiting that greater realm, God’s realm, of knowing his love.

The jailer was so overcome that he invited Paul and Silas to stay and his whole household were baptised. We don’t know what became of the other prisoners. But we do know that faith in Jesus Christ spread as more and more people saw the difference it made to their lives.

Here is the fulfilment of the prophecy in Ezekiel.

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

One by one people were changed. Like Paul with the jailer, they were able to see into another’s heart, to see their fears and have compassion. They could bring hope into the darkest and most miserable of places. They could find joy even in the midst of suffering. No longer were they controlled by self-interest, but by God’s love.

They found freedom. Freedom from fear, Freedom from hatred. Freedom from all bitterness. Freedom to love. Freedom to see as God sees. Freedom to understand the scriptures and to hear God's word.

Such is the power of hope and joy when rooted in the word of God.

It changed the lives of many. It didn't necessarily save them from physical suffering, or hardship or poverty, but it saved them from despair, from emptiness and coldness of heart.

And it still has the power to do that. It is what we are called to do.

to praise God. To bring hope.

As in the prayer attributed to St Francis:

Lord make me an instrument of thy peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love,

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much see

To be consoled as to console,

To be understood, as to understand,

To be loved, as to love,

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.