

SERMON: Sunday – 29 May 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Knowing God through Unknowing and Uncertainty

Acts 16:16-34

John 17:20-26

It seems that some things haven't changed much. Today's story from the Acts of the Apostles surrounds a girl who is gifted with some sort of insight and she makes money for her owners. It sounds like she's a slave, exploited, possibly even trafficked.

And when her owners see that Paul and Silas's preaching was threatening their business, they do what all exploiters do, they try to silence the truth, accusing them of stirring up trouble and dragging them before the authorities on made up charges.

But we do well to follow Paul and Silas' example of humble trust in the Risen God, the God of miracles, who works above and beyond the limits of human strength.

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The writer Brian McLaren writes to Christians everywhere in his new book when he says, "in addition to being a humble and kind human being, I hope you will aspire to being a just human being. Don't seek power over others to control or exploit them or harm them. Instead, use whatever power that comes your way for the common good, so that all people everywhere can share equal justice and equal dignity. Seek justice. Love justice. Do justice. Be a just human being . . . religiously. When I say religiously, I mean intentionally, seeking out practices that promote justice, kindness, and humility".

(Brian D. McLaren, *Do I Stay Christian? A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned* (New York: St. Martin's Essentials, 2022))

Paul and Silas appear to be embodying this kind of humble, God trusting faith. You'd think they would be quick to defend themselves before the authorities but it seems they might not have done that. Even when that meant that they were beaten and imprisoned.

And what was their response? To lick their wounds and feel sorry for themselves? To claim its not fair? To give up?

No. We read that they pray and sing praises! Would that be our response when we'd been falsely accused, or beaten or imprisoned?

Well if it happens, it might be good to respond as Paul and Silas did. Because we see that as a result of their prayer and praise, God moves to bring freedom to all in prison.

In our powerlessness, God can move to bring freedom. In our weakness, God can release the captives. In our stuttering attempts at living out the gospel, God can bring about the good we never thought possible.

The key thing it seems is to do as Paul and Silas tell the jailer, “believe in the Lord Jesus”.

Jesus, who in John 17, before he leaves his disciples to get on with the business of the kingdom, prays for them that they would be one. That they would be in him and he in them; that they would be united

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I am praying that they may all be one – just as you, father, are in me, and I in you, that they too may be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me (21).

In that prayer, Jesus prays that his followers would see his glory and for his love to be in them (24, 26).

So even when we see Paul and Silas imprisoned, we are to take from that that Jesus followers could see his glory and know his love in them even in such a time.

Paul and Silas testify to this because they saw that glory and that love in action as well as knowing that glory and love within them. That’s why they were praying and praising in the first place. Their hearts were filled with a sense of glory and love.

Paul and Silas encourage the jailer to believe in the Lord Jesus and to be baptised as a sign of that life changing encounter. The jailer’s life was changed and his baptism symbolised God’s grace upon him and his whole family.

Our baptism is a sign and a means of God’s grace in our lives. God is in us. We are one with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We will see God’s glory and know his love, even when silenced in prisons of darkness.

This is liberating because it reminds us that the salvation of the world is not dependent on our paltry efforts at evangelism.

That’s not to say that evangelism doesn’t matter because of course it does. But perhaps a humble evangelism is better than a proud one.

I remember studying apophatic theology at New College, not knowing what it was at first.

Essentially it's knowing God through our not knowing as opposed to knowing God through words and ideas (kataphatic). The true knower knows he knows nothing. Not knowing is good. To presume one knows can be dangerous, arrogant.

Apophatic thinking is humble thinking where God is encountered in our not knowing more so than in our certitude. The only people who grow in truth are those who are humble and honest.

Such humility isn't unkind. It doesn't need to push its agenda. It doesn't need to compel anyone to join a club, a political party, or even a religion. It's not always defending itself. It's a calm, collected presence, which Jesus seems to possess entirely.

Jesus didn't say defend yourself or your position. He said in Luke 12:11, don't worry what your defence will be.

Many have given up on church and on religion because they've encountered an unhealthy certitude on the part of Christians which has not always been kind or even relevant.

I think the church needs to address that by being less certain over things we really can't be certain about. Let's not crush people with an unhealthy certitude.

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I read a bit of a book on this by J.P. Williams in which she writes, "We've got to constantly remind ourselves that we don't know. (Some) call this stance "beginner's mind." Imagine how our politics and our churches could change if we had that kind of humility in our conversations. It just doesn't seem possible anymore. Both politics and religion are filled with people clinging to certitudes on every side of every question. This makes civil and humane conversation largely impossible because there's no humility. There's no openness to mystery as being that which is always unfolding".

In that book she goes on to talk about God, who reaches out to us in love and mercy, through the life of Jesus Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who meets us in worship and sacrament and prayer and in moments of grace in the natural world and in human relationships, is at the same time far beyond our reach. The words we use to describe God are more like gestures to point our attention in the right direction than they are like a scientific description or dictionary definition. . . .

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We know too that our words and ideas tend to become wobbly and unreliable when we point them at the divine. . . .

What if it was exactly at the point at which the words go wobbly, at which they start to slip through our fingers, that we might find ourselves able to take an unobstructed glimpse into holy truth? What if it was exactly at the point at which we consent to set aside what we've heard about God that we are best equipped to see clearly the character of the God we encounter? What if the setting-aside turned out to be . . . the single most important thing we need to do?

J. P. Williams, *Seeking the God Beyond: A Beginner's Guide to Christian Apophatic Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019)

Am I saying that Paul and Silas set aside their words? Maybe they did. Yes they preached the good news. But then they were silent. They prayed. They praised. They waited. They saw God's glory. They knew God's love in them and with them. They were content to let God move in God's mysterious ways.

Richard Rohr, in his book *The River of Grace*, writes that "People of deep faith develop a high tolerance for ambiguity and come to recognise that it is only the small self that needs certitude or perfect order all the time. The Godself is perfectly at home in the River of Mystery".

So may we go and do what we can and leave room for the God of miracles to do what we can't. And may we see God's glory and know God's love, in everything.

Let us pray,

O Lord, as we seek to follow Jesus, there are times when we are like Paul and Silas, imprisoned, silenced, lost for words, uncertain what to do. Help us to live in the Mystery of your grace as we pray, let your kingdom come and your will be done, now and forever. Amen.

I want to share with you a short meditative prayer that Thomas Keating used throughout his life. Its the sort of prayer that can help to keep us grounded day by day. I think its called 'letting go'.

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Welcome, welcome, welcome.

I welcome everything that comes to me today because I know it's for my healing.

I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations, and conditions.

I let go of my desire for power and control.
I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval, and pleasure.
I let go of my desire for survival and security.
I let go of my desire to change any situation,
condition, person, or myself.
I open to the love and presence of God
and God's action within.
Amen.
Thomas Keating (1923–2018)