**Stowe church Sunday 13th June BCP communion:**

Acts 16:8-38

Luke 10:1-14

* Good morning Stowe, firstly a real apology that I can’t be with you this morning. Sadly, I think I may have picked up a bit of a D&V bug from my son.
* I have tried to turn my preaching notes (bullet points) into a bit of a short homily for you this morning, my apologies that its not all that polished or eloquent. But as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:1 **And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.**  My hope and my prayer is that in this you see something of **Jesus Christ and him Crucified!**
* We find our selves in acts 16, in some of the opening scenes of Paul’s second missionary journey.
* Previously we have seen Paul’s ministry in great preaching, and reasoning events… but here is Philippi, we are reminded that some of the most important gospel encounters here are the individual ones. A healthy reminder for us today, particularly in this season of pandemic and lockdown, the gospel goes out as individuals share Jesus, with others they meet.
* From Acts 16, as we go through the text, there were a few thoughts I wanted to share about these encounters. But before we get to the first encounter, we want to learn from v6-10.
* Firstly from 6-10. We get this great illustration of God closing a door, but opening a window.
* It’s a lovely line from the sound of music, the mother superior saying “When the Lord closes a door, somewhere he opens a window.”
* We see that here in the text. **When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.**
* I’m sure we have all felt that experience of what seem like the right way forward in life, and the door slams shut… and yet… just a couple of verses later, **After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.** We see how God is clearly pening a window.
* Growing up, my mum has a wonderful quote in her study: “In life, you will always be faced with a series of God-ordained opportunities brilliantly disguised as problems and challenges.” - xCharles Udal. It’s a great reminder, that what seems like door slamming in a situation is often the opportunity for God to reveal where he wanted us to be.
* Now lets look at 3 encounters:
* Lydia and her household
* Now Philippi was an influential city on the main connecting route West to East with Rome.
* It was a roman colony, a place where Roman rule applies here… it’s a mini Rome.
* As we see towards the beginning of Acts, when Paul arrived in a place, it was his habit to look for the Synagogue, to share the news of Jesus with Jews that he found there. But in Philippi what does he find? A small gathering of God-fearing gentile women, who have to meet outside the city.
* In this context, faith was seen on the margins of roman society. It wasn’t in the center of the city, in the temple or the synagogue, but outside.
* And her was a woman of some standing, a merchant in purple cloth, the cloth of royals, mentioned by name, and she is listening to Paul. But wonderfully we hear in the text that it is God that already opened her eyes.
* I wonder, when we look to see what it is tht od is doing, where is it we look? The temptation is to look to the places of power… but, do we find ourselves looking to the margins, like Paul, find ourselves outside the city, by the river, with a small group?
* Often when we do look to the margins, we find that God has been there already, HE is opening people’s hearts, before we even open our mouths!
* Lydia hears and responds to the message of Paul, but it is God that opens her heart. Notice too how Lydia’s conversion leads to action. We see how Lydia’s behavior demonstrates the reality of her conversion she is:
  + Baptized – her and her household,
  + She invites the disciples to use her home –
  + She ends up hosting the church
* When we respond to the gospel of Jesus, how does that lead each of us to action? Using our position and resources, to see God’s kingdom come?

B. Our second encounter is found v16-24 – A fortune teller and Her master.

* This time it’s an encounter with a slave, someone who earnt money, but not her own.
* We need to remember that there is nothing about this encounter that say this woman comes to faith, simple that she has been released from spiritual bondages.
* This is a second example in Acts (first example Acts 13) of Jesus’ missionary followers encountering demonic forces… and in both cases we see a demonstration of God’s power, but how this confrontation with demonic powers stirs up of the people against God.
* Really interesting as we wonder what these demonic spirits looked like, or indeed how we seem them at work today, is to see the close connection between these spirits and the exploitation of the individual in the story. Here is a vulnerable woman, held as a slave earning a great deal of money for her owners. It’s sad to reflect, that we still see this today, the close link between the demonic, false religion and the profit motive of humans.
* Here the slave girl persistently following them around and saying what they were doing… but doing so under the influence of an evil spirit, harming the cause of the gospel.
* Paul simply rebukes this spirit in the name of Jesus, and we hear that the spirit came out.
* In this encounter, we see how the name of Jesus leads to evil being called out in his name.
* We see how individuals who encounter the name and the spirit of Jesus are changed.
* The passage then shows us how the hearts of these men are driven by the greed for profit. Rather than being delighted for the girl that this evil spirit has been driven out of her or amazed at the power and authority that there is in the name of Jesus, these men can only consider how this state of affairs will impact them financially. And rather than admit to their financial loss, they try and express their concerns as religious or political. They want the claim to be respected, so say they are cross for religious and political reasons, but clearly, it’s financial.
* Where in our lives today, do we see something of the demonic, imposing slavery, financial control over other. Over those who are vulnerable, and unable to escape? What does it look like to proclaim freedom for them in Jesus name?
* We see that the preaching of Jesus and his gospel of grace, has profound economic and political implications. The gospel of Jesus, his love, and his grace, changes and transforms society… that is always going to receive a mixed reception.
* As here we see Paul and Silas, stripped and beaten a punishment that a Roman citizen should not have received. We see how as a Christian challenging those things that are not of Jesus , in his name can lead to persecution.

C. Third encounter – The Jailer and his household:

* Here we see how, what looked like the imprisonment of the gospel, actually leads to gospel growth.
* When stuck in the inner most prison in the stocks, what do we find Paul and Silas doing? They worship, they worship not *because* of their situation but *in spite* of their situation, a brilliant lesson for us, that the saving work of Jesus on the cross for us, transcends our current circumstances. God is not worthy of praise because of our current situation, but regardless of it, we should praise him!
* Later when Paul writes a letter to the Philippian church (Philippians 1) he speaks how his chains have given an opportunity for sharing the gospel the gospel… we can believe him when he says this because in this passage we see how even in the depths of prison, he doesn’t stop sharing Jesus.
* I had a good friends and mentor, who had died now, but he told a lovely story about how when he was in ICU after a heart attack, he had gone around speaking to others in the ward, sharing his confidence and trust in Jesus. A great example of what we see Paul doing here… at the lowest point, we find Paul and Silas worshiping and sharing Jesus.
* We see how God is at work in these situation in a way we would never have imagined, working it for our good and His glory.
* We see how the behavior of Paul and Silas, leads to the question from the jailer – sir, what must I do to be saved?
* They reply **‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved’** The simple placing of trust in Jesus to be saved, is what is required. But Pau land Silas offer more, they share the way of Jesus and invite the jailer and his whole household to follow Jesus.
* We see how what looks like a desperate situation for the spread of the gospel, actually leads to gospel growth. And this is something we see time and time again as followers of Jesus. What looks like on the surface to be a disaster for the gospel, is where we see great fruit.
* That is true on the cross, the point where the world looks at Jesus on the cross and see weakness and failure, is the point of his great victory. What looks like failure, is actually triumph. So often we see how God is at work in the places that look like disaster.
* I wonder if we might reflect back in years to come on the Covid lockdowns and see how God has been at work through them, to see the good news of Jesus spread. What looks like on the surface, all the churches have to closes, has actually resulted in a real growth of people seeking spiritual answers, there is a new openness to matter of faith and asking where is God in all of this.
* I saw a lovely cartoon, where Satan and Jesus are talking.
* Satan says to Jesus, “See how COVID 19 has shut up all your churches!”
* And Jesus replies to him “No I’ve just started new churches in every home.”
* This passage shows us how God can work through the most challenging of situations to see his gospel, his good news, his message of Jesus go out. God is still in the business of doing that today.
* Let’s pray.