

29 May 2022

Acts 16:16-34
Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21
John 17:20-26

*Why are there so many
songs about rainbows
and what's on the other side?
Rainbows are visions,
but only illusions,
and rainbows have nothing to hide.
So we've been told and some choose to believe it;
but I know they're wrong, wait and see.
Someday we'll find it –
the Rainbow Connection –
the lovers, the dreamers and me.¹*

In the narrative of *The Muppet Movie*, before fame beckons Kermit the Frog is living a simple life in a Florida swamp. Sitting on a log, playing his banjo, he sings this wistful song: “Rainbow Connection”.

Engaged as we are in the narrative and in the characters we have come to know and enjoy from *The Muppet Show*, it is easy to forget that Kermit is a puppet. Completely under the control of the people who operate his various limbs and features, and voiced by Jim Henson, Kermit has no life of his own, no freedom of movement or thought for himself. In a sense, a puppet is a slave.

Ideas of slavery and what it means to be free are at the centre of Acts 16. We all too readily focus on our heroes Paul and Silas and their miraculous release from their chains, but there are others in this story who need to be set free too. There are

¹ “Rainbow Connection”, Written by: Kenny Ascher and Paul Hamilton Williams. Lyrics © Walt Disney Music Company 1979

many kinds of bondage and slavery, and several of them are to be found in this story.

The woman Paul and his companions meet as they are on their way to the place of prayer is in bondage: she is a slave girl. She is owned; she has little freedom to choose what she will do. She is a puppet, a thing, in service to her masters. But, we learn, she is doubly bound, for she is possessed of a spirit of divination. In this way again she like a puppet: it may be still her voice (and not that of a Jim Henson, say), but they are not her words: the spirit, it seems, compels her to speak out that of which it has knowledge.

Paul invokes the power of the risen Jesus to set her free. She is set free from the spirit at least: but we do not know what became of her once her economic value to her owners was diminished; we do not know whether she remained a slave to them or not. Freedom from the system of slavery that was woven deeply into the fabric of the economic and social system of that time was something that would take much much longer to address – and, indeed, it still features in various forms in our world today. (Next week we'll supply information on how you can make a submission in support of draft legislation to combat modern slavery.)

The slave girl's owners too are subject to a form of bondage: theirs is the bondage of being driven to seek personal economic gain at any cost, the bondage of a mindset that is willing to dehumanise someone who is different and capitalise on the vulnerable, the bondage of cultural superiority and social fear.

Again we do not know what becomes of these owners once they have won "justice" in the court, but having lost forever the income from the fortune-telling services of their slave. Perhaps they simply looked for the next person to exploit. But Paul and the power of the risen Jesus had presented the opportunity of adopting a different way, and we may hope that perhaps they eventually came to a new mindset, one based on gratitude and compassion, one based on wholeness and justice, one based on self-giving love.

The judges are in bondage to the requirements of the system they enforce, in bondage to the forces of empire they represent and its mechanisms of power and

privilege², in bondage to societal expectations, and, perhaps, in bondage to fear of upsetting the populace who join in the attack on Paul and Silas – shades of Pontius Pilate here. Ultimately Paul and Silas are not put in prison because they have actually broken any law: they are imprisoned because they are imprisonable people – vulnerable people – who threaten the bottom line of the powerful.³

In this story we expect that the judges remain unchanged. What might release the judges from their bondage, we may wonder?

And finally, the jailor: in bondage to the duty of his job, in bondage to fear of dishonour and punishment when it appears he has failed to do his job.

But he is set free. He is set free by the vulnerable, self-giving grace exhibited when Paul and Silas refuse to take advantage of the freedom they experience when the chains miraculously fall off and the doors of the jail fly open. To take advantage of this freedom, they recognise, would be at the expense of the jailor's wellbeing.

And as well as freedom from death, the jailor grasps hold of another release too: he accepts the Good News and puts his trust in Jesus as his Lord.

Paul and his companions set the woman free; they point to a different way for the slave owners and for the community; they provide freedom for the jailor. This is a picture, an anticipation, of the freedom, the restoration of all things, which Jesus' resurrection has enabled for some in the present age and which will be available to all in the age to come.

The wistful melancholy of 'Rainbow Connection' expresses Kermit's driving urge for something more in life, something beyond the present grim reality of his existence in the swamp.

² Jerusha Matsen Neal remarks "When Paul reveals his Roman citizenship in the verses that follow this passage (verse 37), the fear in the magistrates' responses makes explicit the shadow of Roman power that circumscribes any definition of 'freedom' in Philippi."

³ I owe this last sentence to Jerusha Matsen Neal.

Talking of the age to come brings us to Revelation 22. With Revelation 22 we have come to the end of the great sweep of the biblical narrative – from Eden, and the Fall and its deathly consequences, through (as Ross reminded us on Thursday night) the Flood and the promise of the rainbow, all the way through to redemption, new access to the tree of life, and new creation.

In some ways it is therefore a very satisfying conclusion. But we need to remember that this is not just a story or a movie. What we have before us in Revelation's picture of Eden restored is a future reality. It is therefore something that we look forward to. And as we look forward we may well do so with a certain wistfulness and longing – *surely*, we hope, the future will be better than the present.

Written to the early church undergoing persecution from Rome – an empire built on privilege and wealth and military might – Revelation warns believers against hope based on any such false paradise, of which there are many different kinds ... or indeed against hope built on pretty rainbows and mere dreams.

The real future is first of all depicted in a dazzling picture of Christ returning. He is the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. He is the root and offspring of David, the inheritor of God's covenant to establish an everlasting royal house through the family of David. He the bright Morning Star, heralding a new dawn, a new beginning, the perfection of new creation.

This return then is the culmination of Eden restored, as God comes to dwell again with and within his creation.

By contemplating this Jesus we fulfil his own prayer in the Gospel of John: that we may be with him where he is, to see his glory, begotten of the Father's love.⁴ And here too we find the unity that Jesus prayed for, as the metaphor of the city refers to a transformed place where humanity celebrates reconciliation in all its forms, health, love, joy, peace, trust, and security.⁵

The future involves reward: to each Christ will give according to what they have done. But there is grace here, for those who are blessed – those who are given the

⁴ Wright, *Twelve*, p. 67

⁵ Kamudzandu

right to the tree of life and access to the heavenly city – are blessed on the basis of the washing of their robes. This “washing of robes” is a metaphor of purity, and earlier in Revelation we find that this has been accomplished, not by their own efforts, but through what Christ has done on the cross.⁶

The compilers of our lectionary have left out a few verses. (Ironically, one of the verses omitted speaks of the peril of taking words away from the scroll of Revelation!⁷) The omitted verse 15 speaks of the expectation that there will remain some for whom the ultimate future is not blessedness: they will be outside the gates, it is said.

The thought is deeply unpleasant to consider – especially if we fear we or those we love might be caught within the categories listed in verse 15 – but we need to affirm that the concept of an ultimate “outside the gates” is vitally important if we are indeed to have hope for a blessed future. To put it another way, we need God’s ultimate justice; we need God’s ultimate putting to rights of all things. If there is no final justice – if the self-serving slave owners, and the malicious crowds, and corrupt judges are not in the end somehow dealt with – then there is no future of blessedness for the slave girls and the prisoners and the penitent jailors. Those who, despite all of the efforts of God’s grace, remain opposed to God and to the Good News that Jesus is the world’s true Lord cannot find a place within the renewed creation in which God himself will dwell. If there is no final justice, if there is no final loyalty, then any picture of a “rainbow connection” or paradise really is only an illusion.

Interestingly, Paul and his companions in Acts are described unwittingly by the slave girl as slaves themselves – “servants of the Most High God”. The key difference is that they are servants by their choice; and this choice also reflects and carries with it the abundant blessing of being adopted into the family of God.

Love is, unsurprisingly given Jesus’ prayer in John 17, the central characteristic of the vision: God’s love for Jesus, and through Jesus, for all his people; the love of

⁶ Rev 7:14

⁷ Verse 19

God's people for one another, creating a unity which will indeed reveal to the world the arresting message that there is another way of being human.⁸

But all this points us to the fact that Revelation's end to the story involves work for us to do. In verse 17 of Revelation 22 we find that our wistful longing for Christ's return is joined with the Spirit's urging, and turns from mere feelings into the cry "Come!" We, the Church, are caught up in the life of the Holy Trinity, joining with the Spirit urging Christ to make his work complete in his coming among us again. And a few verses further on, John the Divine adds his own cry, "Come, Lord Jesus."

But verse 17 also contains an interesting turn:

The Spirit and the bride [that is the Church] say "Come!" And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

We each, servants and siblings of Christ, are encouraged to cry "Come" to those who are currently unbelievers⁹, those who need to find and accept the water of life, those who need freedom from whatever binds them, those who need to find the real "rainbow connection".

*Have you been half asleep,
and have you heard voices?
I've heard them calling my name.
Is this the sweet sound that called the young sailors?
The voice might be one and the same.
I've heard it too many times to ignore it:
it's something that I'm s'posed to be.
Someday we'll find it –
The Rainbow Connection –
the lovers, the dreamers and me.*

⁸ This sentence adapted from Wright, *Twelve*, p.67

⁹ See Morris, *Revelation*, p. 254

Sources:

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