

## Homily for the Sunday after Ascension, 2 June 2019

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Today's epistle is about liberation. The slave-girl is freed from a malign spirit; Paul and Silas are freed from prison; the jailer too is freed, freed in a different way. He is about to kill himself, knowing he would be punished because of the escape of the prisoners; but Paul tells him that the prisoners are still there. He is saved from suicide, and turns to Paul to be baptized.

These three liberations are different. The girl is freed from a spiritual evil, the malign spirit. Paul and Silas are freed from a physical evil, the confinement of prison. The jailer is freed from his everyday self. Paul's extraordinary action in keeping the prisoners there saves the jailer from the threat of punishment by the authorities, but it also enables him to recognize something much greater, something of a different order from the everyday concerns of life. Most of us, most of the time, are dominated by these everyday concerns, and we do not look beyond them. When things go badly wrong, as at times they do for everyone, we can feel as though the world had come to an end for us. But Paul's action enables the jailer to see that these are not the things that really matter. What really matters is not our successes or failures, but how we stand in relation to God, to goodness and to truth. As Isaiah put it: Say, who art thou, that thou art afraid of a man that shall die, and forgettest the Lord thy maker?

The jailer does not need the details of doctrine to be freed in this way; nor do we. He finds his true self, and his true freedom, by discovering within himself the sense of God's presence, and in finding his true calling in the service of God. St Augustine says that to serve God is perfect freedom. Many others have said much the same – Plato and Kant among them. There is in all of us what Calvin calls the sense of divinity, whether or not we recognise it as such; it constitutes that which is best and finest in each of us.

The Gospel reading takes us further. Jesus prays to God on behalf of those who follow him: "As you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, so may they [his followers] also be in us". These are familiar words; but just because they are familiar we need to think about them. At one level, they refer to Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down upon a great congregation like a rushing mighty wind, and caused them to speak in tongues. We shall celebrate Pentecost next Sunday. But Pentecost is a renewal, not a beginning. It is the Jewish feast of the renewal of God's law. The Spirit of God has been with us from always, and in us always, from the creation. For in Genesis God says, 'Let us create humankind in our own image, according to our likeness': which means that there is something of God in all of us. The Spirit is present in all of us, but we are not always conscious of it; it needs to be renewed, revived, so that we may be one with God.

This is what happens to the jailer. He comes to recognize the Spirit of God within him, as he had not done before. He comes to see – as we must come to see – how trivial everyday concerns are in contrast to how we stand morally, how we stand in relation to what God asks of us. But we must also recognize something else, something that is both obvious and harder

to appreciate than we may realize. This is, that God is present not only in us, but in every other human being too. That gives them an intrinsic worth, for in dealing with them we are dealing, in a way, with God. In our attitudes to people we dislike, or people who seem very different from ourselves, it is easy to lose sight of this.

Some years ago I spent some time in Brazil. I was entertained by kindly and generous people. Within sight of their house there was a shanty town of the very poor. My hosts regarded them as objects of pity, and helped them too, but they saw them as almost belonging to a different species. This shocked me at first. But within days I found the same attitude growing on me. It is remarkably easy to discount those who seem different: to fail to appreciate their humanity. We have at long last become aware of the error of so discounting people of other races, genders and sexuality. But there are countless other differences that can trip us up in the same way: classifying them as beggars, as criminals, as geriatrics, and not as people. In wartime the state encourages us to see the enemy as less than human. In many countries, including Brazil, the abandoned adolescents that live on the streets are seen as dangerous trash, and are shot without trial on the slightest suspicion and sometimes without. This is a drastic failure to grasp the humanity, and the divinity, that dwells in every one of them.

We do not shoot down street children. But we are still liable to the failure to appreciate the humanity of others, the divinity that dwells within *every* person we meet. It can be hard to do that, sometimes. But we need to free ourselves from the limitations of our commonplace thinking, as Paul freed the jailer; to free ourselves to be fully human, and thereby to be one with God. That is what today's readings demand of us; that is what is required of all of us.