



**The Work of Women:
A Gospel of Liberation and Justice**

Rev Susan Adams

Year C, Easter 7

Acts 16:16-34

John 17:20-26

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Imagine a world where oppression is normalized, where economic systems exploit the vulnerable, and where those who challenge injustice are punished....

This is not just a modern reality—it was the world Paul and Silas encountered in Philippi.

The story Luke tells, writing early in the 2nd century about Paul and Silas missionary journey 50 or so years earlier, is not a story with the focus on a miraculous escape; it is a story about the radical power of faith to disrupt systems of oppression and bring about transformation.

Frequently the Luke-Acts writings contain hints of the accommodation that the Jew and Gentile Christians of this time were having to make to the Roman authorities. They didn't want to draw attention to themselves; they didn't want to be seen as a threat to the imperial way. They wanted to avoid coming to the attention of the authorities and thereby avoid punishment.

But, as in this story, there is plenty of evidence that these 2nd C followers of Jesus have not forgotten the demand for justice and liberation, and the charge to 'break the chains of oppression' and let the people go free.

Paul and Silas were on their second missionary journey (49-52 A.D.). Philippi was a Roman colony, deeply entrenched in imperial structures. It is reasonable to suppose Paul and Silas were,

generally, being somewhat careful. After all, they ignored the slave girl who was demanding their attention for 4 days - so the story says. She was pointing them out, drawing attention to the work they - Paul and Silas, had been doing quietly. In the end, Paul becomes '*very much annoyed*' whether from shame at ignoring her, or simply because her persistence was drawing attention to what they were doing (which may be the same thing). He is compelled to do something. The slave girl's affliction (*spirit of divination Luke calls it*) was being used by her owners to make a 'great deal of money' for them. In other words, her mental and spiritual health were being exploited for profit by her wealthy and well-connected owners. No wonder they were angry with Paul and Silas. Her situation as a slave, a female with no independent means of support, was being exploited for profit - *her spiritual oppression intertwined with economic injustice*. When Paul confronted her affliction and, as the story continues, she was healed, her owners retaliated thereby making quite clear their economic interests in her mental health, and their desire to keep her 'unwell' for their own economic advantage. The outcome of the exchange was that Paul and Silas could hide no more.

They were exposed. The owners of the girl had them severely flogged and brought them before the magistrates. Their action to heal and liberate the girl brought them to the attention of both the owners of the girl and the public. They were accused of doing the very thing the locals were at pains to avoid doing - draw attention to themselves. They disrupted the status quo; they raised up awareness of the plight of the exploited young woman.

Does it sound like a story that could be told today?

It seems to me that, in this pericope, there is clearly a restatement, in practice, of the gospel of God as preached and lived by Jesus: "release the captives, open the eyes of the blind, and let the oppressed go free." Not only was the slave girl the embodiment of this core principle of Jesus, but Paul and Silas themselves became examples too. And their example included the scary illustration of what can happen if you do take action to live out that gospel instruction to bring freedom, liberation and understanding to all people.

It is something we need to think very seriously about. Progressive theology calls us to see the Gospel as a force for justice. Jesus'

mission, as proclaimed in Luke 4:18, was to “release the captives, give sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free”. In Acts 16, we see this in action—not just in the physical release of the prisoners, but in the spiritual and social liberation of the oppressed. Progressive theology does not confine itself to theological discussion and liturgical practices, but *it is lived theology that finds expression in action, in proclamation, in daring to disrupt the status quo, in having the courage to call attention to itself!*

How progressive is our theology?

I’m aware I’m taking the risk of being seen and heard as ‘political’, but I put it to you that I am urging you to put your theology into practice: the progressive theology we say here at St Matthews that we espouse. I’m urging you to read and to listen to the stories in the media using that progressive theology as a lens, a filter through which to interpret what is being told to you. And to act, as you are able, to disrupt the status quo and demonstrate transformative love.

In Aotearoa New Zealand today, it is not difficult to recognise the modern-day equivalents of the slave girl? Nor is it difficult to see who profits from their suffering. But we must ask ourselves how we, like Paul and Silas, disrupt systems of oppression within our local economic and political structures.

The **Pay Equity Amendment Bill** recently passed in New Zealand has significant implications for women, particularly those in female-dominated industries. The bill raises the threshold for proving sex-based undervaluation, making it harder for workers to claim pay equity. It also **cancels 33 existing claims**, affecting around **150,000 female workers**, who will now have to restart their claims under stricter conditions. Many women in sectors like healthcare, education, and social services were in the process of securing fair wages. The new law disrupts these efforts, potentially prolonging wage disparities.

The bill introduces a **higher threshold** for proving pay inequity, requiring stronger evidence that wages have been historically suppressed due to gender discrimination.

Added to that changes to the Kiwi Saver scheme will also have an impact. Women already face lower retirement savings due to wage gaps. The bill’s changes could further entrench financial disadvantages for women when they reach retirement age. Of

course, there are men also in these low paid sectors of our economic system. We speak for them too. When feminism was rising, we used to say “what is good for women and those dependent on women is good for all”. This is an example. The Roman jailer, too, was a cog in the empire’s machinery. That was until he witnessed the power of the faith of Paul and Silas. He had a flash of insight and saw the system for what it was, came to an understanding of how the system worked - and was transformed.

New Zealand has a history of colonial injustice, economic disparity, and systemic oppression. The Treaty of Waitangi calls us to honour partnership, yet Māori communities still face disproportionate incarceration rates and economic hardship. The story of the jailer reminds us that transformation is possible—not just for individuals, but for institutions.

As a socially conscious church, we are called to:

- Advocate for justice, particularly for marginalized communities.
- Challenge economic systems that exploit the vulnerable.
- Offer radical hospitality and inclusion, as Paul and Silas did.

Paul and Silas did not escape quietly—they demanded justice - they confronted the magistrates! Likewise, we must not be silent in the face of injustice. The Gospel calls us to break chains, to disrupt oppression, and to proclaim a faith that liberates.

I leave with you the initiative of Marilyn Waring who has called together a select committee to examine why the Pay Equity Amendment Bill was passed under urgency without scrutiny.