



**Rev Helen Jacobi**  
**Noticing the slave girl**  
Year C Easter 7  
Acts 16:16-34  
John 17:20-26  
29 May 2022

Saul (or Paul), Tabitha, Peter, Lydia, Paul and Silas. Today we come to the end of our Easter season series of portraits from the Book of Acts. Stories or snapshots of some of the people who made up the early church.

Today's story is recorded to focus on Paul and Silas and their dramatic exit from prison, earthquakes and all, followed by the baptism of the jailer and his family. In biblical terms this is a long story – 19 verses – full of excitement and drama.

But I want us to focus this morning on the beginning of the story, and the unnamed slave girl who starts it all off.

Paul and co are still in the city of Philippi (Greece).

*One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.*

(Just as an aside, suddenly here the writer starts using “we” as if they were there too – apparently this happens 4 times in different sections of the book of Acts – no one is really sure why).

So this girl is young, she is a slave, and she has some kind of fortune telling gift. Her owners make money from her.

The writer goes on:

*<sup>17</sup>While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, ‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’*

*<sup>18</sup>She kept doing this for many days.*

So Paul and his team are there for a while and each day this girl declares who they are. Now her declaration “the most high god” could have been describing a Roman god or the one we think of as God. It is not clear what she means from the text.

*But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour.*

So Paul is annoyed, sick of her interruptions, feels she is “possessed” in some way and orders the “spirit” out of her. Now quite what that means in our more modern day understanding of health and wellbeing is not clear but such actions were well documented for those times.

*But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities.*

And so begins the “main” part of the story – the prison and so on. But I want to stop at:

*But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone.*

Most of the commentaries I read about this praise Paul for freeing the girl. Comments like “by the power of Jesus Christ, her torment was turned to health, her slavery to freedom.”<sup>1</sup>

That is not at all in the text.

And can we not imagine what would have happened to her as a slave if she no longer had this gift her owners could earn money off?

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<sup>1</sup> p524 Feasting on the Word Year C vol 2, David Forney

She might have been killed; or certainly found herself at the bottom of the slave pecking order, no longer in favour with her owners. There was no freedom for her. Her story is silent and hidden behind the text.

Where here is the Paul who would later claim:

*There is no longer Jew or Greek,  
there is no longer slave or free,  
there is no longer male and female;  
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28*

We are not quite there yet.

As Monica Melancthon, in the podcast *By the Well*<sup>2</sup> comments – this girl is oppressed because of her gender, being a slave, being “possessed”, and is exploited economically. And yet she has a voice, she is not inhibited, she will speak. And does so for some days before being shut down by Paul. Melancthon points out that this girl is an example talked of by the prophet Joel (2:28-32) who we will hear quoted next week for Pentecost:

*I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;  
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,  
and your young men shall see visions.  
Even on the male and female slaves,  
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.*

This girl found her voice and spoke out. Paul shut her down.

Last week we heard the story of Lydia, a wealthy woman, a business woman who Paul baptises and welcomes in to the church.

Lydia’s story is told in such a positive way.

The unnamed slave girl does not get the same hearing.

Who in our world might the slave girl stand beside?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://bythewell.com.au/>

School girls in Afghanistan who no longer attend school;  
school children in the US where owning guns is more important  
than protecting children;  
young men in Russia forced to fight in Ukraine;  
children in the Pacific losing their homes to rising sea waters;  
children in Aotearoa who have no home or who are not attending  
school.

Who do we disregard and overlook? Who do we write off because  
they are different from us; or because we do not understand them?  
Who do we miss altogether?

In our lives (as in our biblical reading) we are always called to listen,  
to notice, to stop, to see. I guess we should feel reassured that if  
Paul missed things it is ok for us to as well. How can we listen better  
to each other? How can we as a society notice those who are made  
invisible and listen to them?

Today within our own community we are undertaking a listening  
process. In our session after the 10am service we are going to be  
structured into pairs or threes and spend some time listening to  
how we see our parish life. We are going to record some thoughts  
but the most important thing really is the listening. How does  
another see our community? What can I hear and learn in what they  
say? What assumptions might I make about the way others see  
things?

Then you might like to think about your week ahead. Who is there  
in your work team or other communities who might do better if you  
listened some more? What meeting do you need to go into and  
make a supersize effort not to speak? Or are you someone who  
doesn't speak up normally? Do you need to make a supersize effort  
to speak and to be heard?

Look for an invisible slave girl this week and listen to her.