

After His time, fasting in the wilderness, Jesus returned to the Galilee where He had been brought up. One Sabbath he went to his local synagogue in Nazareth and reading from the sixty-first chapter of the prophet Isaiah, He read: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”*

With just a little effort we can begin to understand something of what that prophecy must have meant for his audience. He is announcing that the time to receive God’s salvation had come for the Jewish people; the very meaning of their sacred history had come to fruition, had reached its end and purpose.

The children of Israel and their ancestors had been captives, held prisoner, many times. Joseph the All-Comely, the son of Jacob the patriarch was thrown into a pit by his brothers and sold into Egypt. Their descendants would be enslaved in their turn for four hundred years. Liberated under Moses, they would enter the promised land only to be held by a series of conquerors: the Assyrians, the Babylonians who would lead them into exile; then came the empires of the Persians, then the Greeks, then last of all, the Romans who, at least, tolerated their faith in only one God but disapproved of Roman citizens taking to Judaism.

How the people of Israel must have longed for their salvation and deliverance! Its coming is what Simeon the Righteous recognised when he received the Christ-child in the temple when He was forty days old. But today we hear of another sign of the coming of salvation, of liberation from the prison. Here a man’s deliverance from the darkness of physical blindness is reported in St John’s gospel. But in their refusal to recognise Christ for who He is, Jesus’ opponents, the party of the Pharisees, can only slander and criticise Him for breaking the Sabbath.

The once-blind man himself says, *“Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind.”* But they, for all their perfect physical vision, remain in spiritual darkness and refuse to see. The rest of the story and the outcome for old Israel, we know, when most of them rejected the Christ when he came, as even to this day and the Romans destroyed the city and the temple in 70 AD.

So it is that the faith of the risen Christ has come to the whole world. Christ, who said Himself that He was sent at first, only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel: after Pentecost, sends His apostles out to the whole world. And here today, in the Acts of the Apostles, we hear of Paul and Silas. They have just left Asia and for the first time have entered Europe. Yet at Philippi they find themselves imprisoned.

There was no synagogue at Philippi, so Jews gathered at the river to pray. Here Paul and Silas got themselves into trouble when Paul casts out a demon. As Paul could see, it was demonic power that had given a slave girl her apparent ability to be a soothsayer, a bringer of messages from the pagan gods. Not only has Paul robbed the owners of the slave of a good source of money, they are accused as well, as far as the Philippians can see, of trying to convert Roman citizens to a new Jewish sect: *“These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our cit and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe.”* (Acts 16:20-21)

We might ask what was the real difference between the holy prophets of Israel and the oracles and soothsayers among the pagans. Among the ancient Greeks the Python of Apollo at Delphi was the prime example of a place where individuals, as well as the city states, went to consult the will and the advice of their gods. Ancient paganism, although it supported social conventions and laws, did not have the urgent moral purpose and mission of the faith of Israel. Apart from the imported mystery cults of foreign gods, the ancient Romans and Greeks had little idea of what became of the soul after death. Ultimately pessimistic in its view of human destiny, paganism could only offer the temporary protections and blessings of

fickle gods which, at heart, kept the devotees prisoners in an uncertain world.

No wonder that the jailer in our story today chooses suicide rather than face a fate worse than death when he thinks his prisoners have escaped. There was no sense here of what we know in Christ of the *sanctity of life*, only a sense of honour, family patrimony and glory on the one hand, or shame, dishonourable servitude and cruel fate on the other. Panicked by the earthquake, the jailer seeks an escape through ending his life.

The prophets of Israel, however, looked beyond the inevitable wheel of life, death and new birth, to the end of history, towards a goal in the purposes and the will of the living God. And what they prophesied, Paul is able to present to his jailer and his whole house. For the jailer also is a prisoner of sorts and finds in the risen Christ his enlightenment and liberation. So it was that, among certain Jews and gentiles, Paul and Silas established the first foothold for Christ in Europe at Philippi.

It is not within the bounds of political correctness today to describe non-Christian religions as inspired by demons - although, as you know, that does not concern me very much. It was certainly St Paul's opinion that the annoying slave girl who followed them with cries of "*These men are servants of the Most High God,*" needed exorcism. She reminds us of the two demoniacs in St Matthew's gospel who recognise Christ when He comes as the Son of God.

The essential difference between the pagan oracles and biblical prophecy is that one keeps its followers trapped, imprisoned in the way of life of the *Old Adam*, whilst the other points to our liberation and enlightenment in Christ, the *New*. So in as much as the slave-girl lost her spirit of divination - and cost her owners a lot a money - we must presume that Paul was right: the *Python*, the demonic oracle of a pagan god, was conquered by the power of Christ.

There are many things that can be learned from the two liturgical readings appointed for this Sunday; many themes that might be developed. Let us restrict ourselves today to remembering how easy

it is to fall back into the old way of life, anything that can still come to mind, despite our repentance, our change of mind. One aspect of acquiring the mind of Christ, of having our spiritual eyes opened, though blind from birth, is to guard against all superstitious thinking, or enslavement once again to any object, any power, any process, any fear which is not of Christ.

It is very easy to find ourselves being drawn into magical thinking, even in our prayers; to imagine that certain rituals, folk customs, common notions and ideas have the force of real power when they do not. They belong to imprisoned and benighted souls, not to the faithful. Anything not of faith is Sin. In true prayer it is not the world that is changed to suit us but rather, we are the ones who are changed. What need have we of fortune tellers, horoscopes, charms and portents who are destined for resurrection from glory to glory, who are surrounded by the prayer so the saints, who receive the Holy Gifts from the heavenly altar, who are, indeed, filled with the Spirit of the living God?