

## What is God Doing in the World

*Note: This homily is based on Acts 16:16–34. Please read that passage to the congregation before preaching this homily.*

What is God doing in the world? With the World Powers, the destructive forces of extremist religion and politics, realistically, what can God do? Does he need our help? We ourselves are caught up in the environmental changes affecting our planet, and we are forced to cope with the onslaught of flood, fire and cyclones - let alone the devastation in many other nations. What is God doing?

The events in the passage we're looking at today sound very familiar. An earthquake, disputes over religion, abuse of migrants, political strife. You could understand if the apostle Paul asked: "What is God doing?" Let's see how this passage answers that question and what that means for us today.

Luke wrote 2 books in the New Testament: the Gospel that bears his name, and The Book of Acts. In Acts, Luke tells us what Jesus continued to do after his death and resurrection through his disciples. At the end of Luke's Gospel, Jesus commissioned his disciples to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins from Jerusalem to all nations. Through Acts, Luke shows the impact the gospel had in a world that followed fake gods. The gods of power, pleasure, survival, wealth. Because the gospel of Jesus is God's word, then it will impact our culture, our society in much the same way as it did in Luke's day. The gospel announces the reign of a new King, the Lord Jesus, and calls on all people in every nation to stop ignoring Jesus and to submit to him as Lord and Saviour. That message was not popular then, and it is not popular today. In today's passage in Acts 16 we see **Paul and Silas realise that the risen Lord Jesus is present with them, whatever situation they are in.** That truth is what we need to live as disciples of Jesus today.

## What is God Doing in the World

Following Jesus' command to:

1. Proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations, Paul and his team had completed a circuit of the Roman Empire and planted many new churches. Some time later Paul and the team decided to re-visit those churches to strengthen them. They also expanded their trip further in the Roman Empire and in Acts 16 Luke records their time in Philippi - a Roman Colony and a leading city of Macedonia.

On the first Sabbath they met with some women at a place of prayer outside the city. Lydia was a worshipper of God but had not yet heard of Jesus. In Acts 16:14 Luke records:

*The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.*

It was not Paul's presentation which persuaded her, but the Lord. The Lord Jesus, *opened her heart to respond.* She and her household were baptised and invited Paul and his team to stay at her place.

Afterwards Paul was followed by a slave girl and her owners. They made money from her ability to foretell the future. However, day after day she harassed Paul, until this became so disturbing that he cast out the spirit the slave girl had. Consider Paul's words, recorded by Luke in vs. 18:

*"In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.*

When her owners saw they lost their source of income, they were furious and ended up creating an uproar in the city. Notice too, that it was not Paul who cast the spirit out, but Jesus.

The city magistrates are charged with keeping the peace - they cannot permit a riot. Paul and Silas are arrested, charges heard, even the crowd joins in the

## What is God Doing in the World

attack. Luke notes that they were severely flogged, before being thrown into prison.

You might wonder, where is Jesus in all this? Well, in vs. 22-32 Luke next shows us that their:

### 2. Arrest creates Opportunity.

Having had a severe flogging, you might think they'd sit quietly. Scene 1 - Vs 25 at midnight we hear them singing hymns and praying. The other prisoners are - heckling them? Begging for quiet? No, Luke notes that: the *other prisoners are listening to them*.

Second scene: an earthquake. Not violent, but enough to shake the prison doors open - and not just for Paul and Silas - all the prison doors are open. If you like, here is God's answer to the magistrates' attempt to hinder gospel preaching.

Scene 3 - when the gaoler sees the prison doors open, he has a panic attack. Surely they all escaped and he is as good as dead. Paul's call to him comes just in time before he ends his life. The other prisoners are all there - perhaps Paul persuaded them to stay. Futile to escape.

Scene 4 - the gaoler wants to hear what motivates Paul and Silas. Paul sees an opportunity to explain the rich and confident hope he has in the Lord Jesus, and of forgiveness and eternal life. The gospel is proclaimed and we hear heavens':

### 3. Angels Rejoicing.

Jesus said that when one sinner repents, the angels rejoice. The gaoler and his family put their faith and trust in Jesus as the Lord and Saviour.

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In each scene in Philippi the Lord Jesus is at work. It was not a breeze for Paul and Silas - travelling, the distraction of the slave girl, the riot, flogging, gaol, the earthquake, the gaoler and his family. Yet at each stage Jesus is Lord and using the events his messengers experience to enable people to hear and respond to his message.

Paul was so convinced of the sovereignty of Jesus that he knew that whatever he experienced was in the Lord's hand, and his role was to proclaim Jesus' message. Jesus got him where Jesus wanted him, and Paul knew what he was meant to do: proclaim the message. And to do that in a way which was warm, welcoming, genuine. No threats, no watering it down, no false promises. Just the truth that Jesus announced: the gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins.

Where is God today? What is he doing? He has put you and me in this world, among the people we meet day by day, with all the struggles you and I have. The disappointments, the failures, the joys, the struggles and upsets of life. Through these you share life with others. Do the promises of God give you hope for the future? A future beyond this world. A future with your Lord who loves you. If Jesus has given you a hope for the future, maybe your friends and neighbours could benefit from that too? Pray and look for opportunities.

If you do not yet share in the hope Jesus gives us, reflect on the life Paul lived, his experiences here. Why would he do that if he was not certain about these promises? Take time to get to know Jesus through his word.

What is Jesus doing today? Bringing his people into his kingdom; sending his people to declare repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name. This

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passage gives us confidence that Jesus is present with us no matter where we are or what our circumstances are. Praise God!