

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Disappointment and Hope

Easter 6C 26th May 2019 Linton 8 am and Shudy
Camps 10 am

Acts 16.9-15

John 5.1-9

Both the stories in our readings today start with situations of frustration and disappointment. Paul was on a missionary journey in which he'd hoped to visit all the churches he'd previously founded, in order to encourage them. But, first of all, near the very beginning of the journey he'd had a big falling-out with his mission-partner, Barnabas, and they'd gone their separate ways, and then, when his planned route would have taken him to the West Coast of modern Turkey, which was then called the province of Asia, something stopped him – the Book of Acts says that he had been *forbidden* by the Holy Spirit to preach there and then, when he attempted to get to the north, Black Sea Cost of Turkey, then known as the province of Bithynia, again *'the Spirit of Jesus did not allow him'*. (Acts 16.6 and 7). We're not told more about how this forbidding and not allowing occurred, though we do

gather from elsewhere in Acts that Christian prophets, speaking out in church meetings, sometimes gave messages about things like this; but clearly, Paul, however it came about, felt that there were blockages in the way of his plans. Even if he came up against these blocks in what felt like a spiritual experience of prophecy, 'words of knowledge', or dreams, they must have been to some extent frustrating and disappointing, because they left him with the question– where *was* he supposed to go, then?

And then he had the dream we are told about – the dream of a man from Macedonia in northern Greece pleading with him, and saying *'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'* Acts 16. 9) – and that's where the first reading began today, and that's what took Paul to Philippi, a leading city in Macedonia. Frustration and blockage had become the opening of a new and unexpected door. And Paul, being the decisive man that he was, had no hesitation about going through it.

We know from later on in the story (and as we shall hear so, Paul's frustrating next week) that dramatic things happened in Philippi – arrest, imprisonment, and an earthquake in the middle of the night which led to Paul and Silas's release, with the opportunity to preach to his gaoler, and baptise him and his household. But what we also know, from Paul's letter to the Church in Philippi, was that the little Christian community he founded there was very dear to his heart; its members

continued to support him financially when he moved on from among them; they gave him very little trouble (unlike some of the other churches) apart from the matter of two women who were good church workers, but just couldn't seem to get on with each other. But basically, the church was generous, hospitable and faithful, and women had an important role in it. We saw this in today's reading where the very origin of that church in Philippi was with Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, who invited Paul and Silas to come and stay in her house. We know that having wealthy people who could use their houses as the base for Christian communities was very important to the life of the early Church (see 1 Corinthians 16.19, and Colossians 4. 15) . So, Paul's frustrating diversion from his original plans led him to a place and to people who would be a constant source of encouragement for him.

Our Gospel reading today told us of a different kind of disappointment and frustration – one which – unlike Paul's – lasted for a long , long time without resolution. I'm talking, of course, about the situation of the man who had been lying beside the Pool of Bethzatha (or Bethesda) for 38 years, hoping for a cure in the waters when they were occasionally stirred up. It was apparently believed that this was the work of an angel, and that only one person each time could find healing in that welling pool. But the man had no one to help him into the water before anyone else got there first.

This describes a situation of such immense and chronic disappointment and frustration that it's easy to see how it must have entered the man's very soul. His expectations must have been eaten away to form a state of wretched resignation always lying there each day (no doubt brought by a resentful relative who was glad to have him out of the house for the day), but with no real hope .

Our reading told us that Jesus cut through the state of psychological despair and resignation with his question '*Do you want to be made well?*' (John 5.5), and then - when the man had no answer but his tale of woe – with the somewhat brisk command, '*Stand up, take your mat and walk*' (5.8). I wonder what happened in the man's mind and heart as he found himself doing this totally unexpected thing. Was he entirely happy? We do know that later he pointed Jesus out to the authorities, who were evidently not pleased with this miracle having been performed on a Sabbath. Did the man harbour some resentment at being launched into a totally new life so suddenly, or was he just naïve?

Whatever the case, we can use the man at the Pool of Bethzatha as an emblem of the kind of disappointment and frustration which can almost become someone's way of defining themselves.

WE all know disappointment in our life; sometimes it's short-term, and later we look back on it, like Paul, as a

period when we were being led into something which wasn't what we planned, but which has turned out for the good. But other disappointments and frustrations seem endless – it may be disappointment with our situation, with other people around us, with ourselves, or even with God. If we pause for a moment, we can perhaps think of things which are disappointing and frustrating in our lives...

We can also think of other people, I'm sure, who seem to have buckled-under with the weight and continuity of their disappointments. We might wish to tell them to buck up, and be a bit more hopeful, and even active in doing something to improve their situation. But a little imagination about the man at the Poolside – and maybe about our own experiences of things which weigh us down long-term - should help us be less impatient and more gentle.

And yet... the figure of Jesus, striding into the picture, tells us that no one should give up hope altogether. There is a salvation which may reach any one of us from a completely unexpected direction, in a completely unexpected way, at a time no one could have expected. Somehow, we have to lay hold of that hope, and convey it, both to ourselves, and to others whose disappointment may seem to have eaten them away.

So, our takeaway message today is that we should pray to be people of hope – come what may – and people who can share that hope without being judgemental and harsh, either to ourselves or to others when disappointment threatens to become our very identity. Our identity truly is, after all, as beloved children of God for whom Jesus came to earth, died and rose again. Herein is hope bigger than any disappointment or frustration.

