

Seventh Sunday of Easter, New Testament, Year C

DEADLY DUTY

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Acts 16:16-34

Analysis by Peter Keyel

16One 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. 17While 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." 18She kept doing this for many days. 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. 19But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. 20When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews 21and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." 22The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened

and everyone's chains were unfastened. 27When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. 28But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

DIAGNOSIS: Dead to the Law

Step 1 Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Doing Your Duty

Unique among Paul and Silas's antagonists here, the jailer is not portrayed as corrupt. Although some jailers certainly were (and are) corrupt, all we really know is that this one followed instructions. He did what he was supposed to do, which was secure his prisoners to the best of his ability. We do know that he let the prisoners sing, and although the magistrates had him beaten, there is no evidence of maltreatment once in the jailer's care. It looks like someone trying to do his best in a corrupt society.

Step 2 Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Believing in Your Duty

In fact, this jailer seems to take his charge very seriously. The jailer locked Paul and Silas "in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks." This is someone who values doing a job well done and tries to do his best at his job.

Although jailer may not be an admirable job, this man seems to be one the magistrates could trust with their prisoners. His heart seems to be in the correct place, right?

Step 3 Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Dying for Your Duty
Yet, we see in v. 27, that the jailer's heart is not in the right place. He is prepared to die for his duty. When his world is shaken apart by an earthquake, and forces beyond his control have ensured his failure, he prepares to do the final thing duty requires of him: suicide. This man's devotion to duty was going to kill him, revealing that duty is a false idol. God's earthquake lays that bare: following the Law leads to death.

PROGNOSIS: Alive in Baptism

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Living in Your Baptism

Although the Law demands the jailer's death, the jailer does not die. Instead, Paul the prisoner, speaks words of life to him: "do not harm yourself, for we are all here" (v. 27). Paul is able to speak here because of God's Messiah, who already died to his duty and consequently defeated death when God raised Him from the grave.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Trusting in Your Baptism

The jailer's encounter with the gospel leads to an immediate response: "he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'" (vv. 29-30). Being saved from the death that his honor demanded has fundamentally changed the jailer. The answer that Paul and Silas give is simple: trust in the One who saved him.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Doing Your Baptism
The jailer's next steps are not borne out of duty. They are a consequence of his newfound faith in Jesus. He takes people who

had formerly been prisoners to him into his own house and washes their wounds. The urgency of the jailer's concern for his new friends' wellbeing even preempts his own baptism. He is now free to serve the Lord, and along with showing compassion to his former charges, he also rejoices in his baptism. That is doing his baptism.