

Sermon for Easter 7 (C) – St James', Cambridge – May 12th 2013

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Lectionary Texts: Acts 16: 16-34

Psalm 97 'The Glory of God's Reign'

Revelation 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-end

John 17:20-end

“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but *I* know you; and these know that *you* have sent me. I *made* your name known to them, and I *will* make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.” (John 17:25-26)

- I don't know about you, but I'm someone who has a great difficulty in remembering names. I'm great on faces and stories, but when it comes to names, I really struggle – to the point that often, when I go to visit a patient in the hospital and introduce myself, asking “Are you Mr. Cameron?” (or whatever) and then go on to have a perfectly meaningful conversation with them, find that by the time I come to leave (and am quite likely to have offered to pray for them), I have a complete blank as to their name – the name that was perfectly clear in my mind only minutes earlier.
- So one of my favourite ways of getting to know a new group of people is to go round the group, with each person in turn telling the ‘story’ of their name: why their parents might have chosen it, what it might mean, whether they like it (or not), whether they have any ‘pet’ or ‘preferred names’ and so on... (and when it comes to your turn in the group, you start by reintroducing the person who's been before you and whatever you manage to remember that they've said about *their* name)
- One of the things that usually emerges is that people often have different names for themselves appropriate to the different people they relate to, depending on the nature and intimacy of that relationship. I, for example, use my full name, ‘Deborah’, in most formal situations... whereas my ‘everyday’ name is ‘Debbie’... but my family call me ‘Deb’ and my very closest friends ‘Debs.’ And it matters to me: I don't like it when people assume a familiarity or intimacy that hasn't yet grown between us.
- In African cultures, it's the norm to address someone with a title relating to designation (‘elder, young girl, mother’ etc) – in Rwanda, I was always rather surprised when I was addressed as ‘Mother of Rebecca’ (one of my

children – although it did make a change from David’s wife!) and in many tribes it’s considered offensive to either offer or ask someone’s ‘proper’ name. As a member of the Masai people responded when a westerner unwittingly asked him his name, he responded sharply: “Do not throw my name about. My name is important. My name is me. My name is for my *friends*.”¹

- Names are at the heart of today’s readings: in the reading from Acts, Paul prays for a slave girl to be freed from the oppressive spirit and interest group who’ve been making a living out of her. Paul can’t bear to see her so far from all that God has created her to be in him- the fulness of his name in her - and says to the spirit **“I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.”** And it does.
- As a result, he and his companion Silas, find themselves in prison. It’s unclear quite what law they are actually accused of violating (in this instance they’re not accused of being ‘Christians’), but those who are going to lose out as a result have coerced the authorities into locking them up in revenge.
- But it can’t stop the Spirit that’s already filled Paul and Silas. They overflow with songs of praise to God, with all the other prisoners listening – until God suddenly sends an earthquake, so that the prison doors are thrown open and they are free to escape. But Paul is more concerned for the Jailer (who’s about to kill himself for failing in his responsibilities) than his own freedom and says ‘You don’t need to worry – we’re all still here!’ It’s a pretty amazing reaction, isn’t it? Quite the opposite of ‘Prison Break’ or even ‘Shawshank Redemption’.
- When the jailer asks **“What must I do to be saved?”** He’s told **“Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved...”** The word of the Lord is spoken to them all... and the entire family are baptized as a matter of urgency: **“And he and his entire household rejoice(d) that he has (had) become a believer in God.”**
- The jailer is someone who’s begun to indwell the name of God: he’s begun to discover an intimate and personal relationship with him. God has entrusted his name to him. And he invites us to go deeper into it, too.
- So what does it mean?

¹ Vincent J Donovan: Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai (SCM 1978) p.187

- The first thing it means is that wherever we are, we live in the presence of the One who promises us, just as he promised Moses: “I am who I am and I shall be who I shall be... and I shall be *with* you...” (Exodus 3:14, 12) - *wherever* you are and whatever is going on for you.
- Last time I preached here, I began to tell you about the time I was invited to spend some time doing a series of seminars and bible studies with some of the inmates in Louisiana State Penitentiary (just over a year ago).
- It’s a harsh environment – renowned for being one of the most punitive systems in the USA: with 84 of the 5,000 men in the prison on Death Row; a State governor who prides himself on never granting parole; and several in the small group we met with, with 200-year ‘life’ sentences.
- It’s built on a former slave plantation (the size of Manhattan) and is known as ‘Angola’ because some of the slaves on the original plantation came from Angola, Africa. We learned from ‘the inside’ of some of the subtly hidden forms of corruption, degradation and violence built carefully into the system, but what the men wanted to talk about far more than anything else was who God was/is and how God is at work in that place and in their lives. And since we visited, I’ve kept in regular touch with them through letters and (just recently, thankfully,) email.
- The other day, one of the men (who works as a pastor within his cell block) wrote about how he had become concerned that “the men I have been ministering to didn't seem to be living in the joy and the power of the new covenant reality. I mean, our lives should be *bursting* with joy: filled with hope and faith and love. Our lives should be a *celebration*. So I'm studying and preaching and talking about how Jesus is greater than *everyone/thing*. As today’s psalm puts it: **“For you, Lord, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all Gods.”**
- That’s the reality of living in his name: Jesus’ name in each one of us.

- He wrote more about how he had been studying Hebrews to try and understand Jesus' majesty more – sometimes 2-3 times each day -which I can assure you is huge, given their routine. When we were there, the men told us how *hard* it was to find time to be on their own with God. Because they are there for life, they are put in dorms, rather than individual cells, so private space is very rare and many of them got up in the middle of the night or before everyone else got up at 5am in order to be able to be still with God and to pray and read the Bible.
- He wrote how Hebrews (which is not one of the easiest books in the Bible) had gradually opened up for him – gradually blossoming like a flower. “And then”, he said, “It suddenly happened! Jesus said to me “Just *believe* – that’s all it takes! Just *believe (trust)* that you are a *new* creation in Christ Jesus, just believe that you have *been* crucified with Christ and raised to a *newness* of life... just believe that you are *more* than a conqueror...”
- “I began to challenge the men to pray and to believe that *God is able*. One of them began praying for God to move for reconciliation between him and his children but God went beyond that and began to bring reconciliation not only between him and his children, but between him and his former wife. Since then he has had a wonderful visit with his former wife and their children...”
- “Every week there was someone else with a testimony about how God had been at work in their lives. You see, I am at the point in my life that I have determined not to just have radical faith; I'm going to have some *stupid* faith. I got to thinking about it and I never remember Jesus admonishing his disciples or anyone else for having too *much* faith. He was always chastising them for having too *little* faith (a mustard seed is not that big)....”
- “There is more to this story but it will have to wait because I am running out of time and space on this e-mail (We only have 30 minutes and a

certain number of characters per e-mail). Will share the rest of the awesome work of God in my next e-mail. Greg.”

- That’s what the passage about Paul and Silas is about, isn’t it? Living in the peaceful, hopeful, joyful presence of the one who prays for us that “they may be with me where I am” –in the bosom of his Father: as close and as secure as it is possible to be, in the love shared between this Father and his beloved Son: **“As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me...”**
- Our lives are interwoven with others through going deeper into this love. When he’s addressing the disciples in the farewell discourses, Jesus always uses ‘you’ in the plural: “...it is for your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you: but if I go I will ask my Father to send him to you...When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth...” Going deeper into God’s love always means going deeper into God’s love *for one another*: they go hand in hand.
- I wonder what it might mean for us here at St James? It’s been an amazing thing for David and myself to be welcomed as part of this church community.... We haven’t even been here for a year, yet, but we already feel so much a part of you: and we’re so grateful to each one of you - as well as to those we’ve never met - for your faithful commitment to it over the years so that it is possible for us to be part of it now (and our children too, when they come home – they love it here: they think it’s got great “vibes” – and they have quite a lot of experience of different churches over the years). It was very moving to hear at the APCM of the many members who died early last year – and to imagine the ways in which they and so many others have contributed to the life and flourishing of the church so far – not mention all that is yet to come.

- Just think of what we're part of: something so much bigger than we can begin to get our heads around! When God said to Moses I am who I am and I shall be who I shall be... he went on: "This is my name for all time. And thus I am to be invoked for all generations to come."
- Then in our reading from Revelation (which is the culmination of the whole book), Jesus names himself as "the Alpha and Omega – the first and the last – the beginning and the end" -uniting himself with his Father and (in John) praying not only for those who've already come to believe, but also on behalf of those who *will*... for all those who have yet to discover God's name and him calling *them* by name. That includes us!
- When my father was dying from a brain tumour a few years ago, he told me: "I am so grateful for all that's happened through all of this – I wouldn't have not had it – I've seen and understood things I'd never been able to before.... And my role has been to articulate the wonder as fully as I can... I only wish I could show people more of it.'
- And I suddenly realised what he was saying: that if *this* was his task, to articulate praise, then it could never *be* completed – in this life or the next – only ever begun and then carried on throughout all eternity. He said, 'This continuous awareness of God's glory and being given the chance to articulate it is the beginning of the next life.... When I die I hope that I am *praising*: that's what I want my last words to be.'
- *That's* what we're swept up into, in the love between Father, Son and Spirit! We're part of something so amazing that we simply have to share it. It's what was at the heart of 'Prayer 48' that took place here during Holy Week... creating a sacred space where we could simply 'be' in God's presence together and pray for those in the wider community to be raised up and drawn deeper into God's love. It was deeply significant – and it's only a beginning....

- So as we prepare ourselves for the outpouring of the Spirit afresh at Pentecost, let's offer ourselves to God for all God longs to fulfil in and among us and gather our voices into one as we pray: 'The Spirit and the bride say "Come." And let everyone who hears say "Come." And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift....*Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*

Amen.

Lectionary Readings:

Acts 16: 16-34

16 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. 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.

19 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. 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.

25 About 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.

Psalm 97 'The Glory of God's Reign'

- ¹ The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad!
- ² Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
- ³ Fire goes before him,
and consumes his adversaries on every side.
- ⁴ His lightnings light up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.
- ⁵ The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,
before the Lord of all the earth.

- ⁶ The heavens proclaim his righteousness;
and all the peoples behold his glory.
- ⁷ All worshippers of images are put to shame,
those who make their boast in worthless idols;
all gods bow down before him.
- ⁸ Zion hears and is glad,
and the towns of Judah rejoice,
because of your judgements, O God.
- ⁹ For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.

- ¹⁰ The Lord loves those who hate evil;
he guards the lives of his faithful;

he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.

¹¹ Light dawns for the righteous,
and joy for the upright in heart.

¹² Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous,
and give thanks to his holy name!

Revelation 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-end

12 ‘See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.’

14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates...

16 ‘It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.’

¹⁷ The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’

And let everyone who hears answer, ‘Come.’

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift...

Amen; come Lord Jesus.

20 The one who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

John 17:20-end

20 ‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴Father, I desire that those also,

whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

25 'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'