

TUESDAY COMMUNION

Humans: exploited or cared for?

Hymn:

Reading: Acts 16.16-24 (Paul in Philippi)

Prayers:

This is a story about a young woman who is clearly mentally disturbed and who is kept at a shrine as woman who can offer to tell people what the future holds for them. It reminds us of the famous Delphic oracle where a person would come and their future would be foretold.....

Luke makes clear in his story that he doesn't believe that those who had her in their care were interested primarily in any religious beliefs. Their main concern was money.

This young woman with her probably rather wild appearance and her words about what was about to happen was a source of wealth to those who kept her as a slave.

Luke, using the language and the way of thought of his time, tells us that when this woman meets with Paul, the evil spirit within her recognises the true Spirit of God in Paul. She cries out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation."

Our Bible read says that Paul was "annoyed" by this constant declaration and we can almost imagine her chasing him down the street as in a Monty Python sketch. The word translated "annoyed" though is perhaps better translated "worn down".

At first, it may have been surprising to Paul to hear someone bearing witness to the power of God to save and transform. After a time, though, Paul may have begun to realise that here was a woman who was being used and abused by those who had her in their power. She may have been shrieking a true word but here was a woman who needed to be set free from what Luke would call an evil spirit.

As in the stories of Jesus, and now using the name of Jesus the Messiah, Paul in the name of the Spirit of God orders the evil spirit to come out of her.....

The exploitation of others has been going on as long as there have been human beings. Indeed we see the weak being exploited by the strong in the animal kingdom.

Christ comes, at least in part, to change the way in which we see people and the way we treat people.

If we are thinking in this season of Lent of what it means to have "hope" then we may speak of the hope that we will speak up for those who are exploited.

One of the most grievously exploited groups of people in our country are people, often poor women, who are brought to this country with the promise of good jobs but who find themselves either forced into prostitution or what is little more than slave labour.

Laslo, the young Hungarian some of you helped a few years ago was one of these!

As I read this story, I couldn't help but think of the way in which disturbed human beings have been used and abused through the centuries.

The Bedlam, the London "hospital" where those who were described as "mad" were placed was also a place visited by tourists who paid to see the ravings of deeply disturbed people. Among them, no doubt were those suffering from what we would now call dementia.

So, to finish with a story of hope.

Yesterday I went to see a family in Buxton. The lady told me her elderly mother had suffered from dementia for some years. When she needed residential care they looked at a number of places and in the end chose a home in Ripley which had been purpose built for those with dementia.

She told me how splendidly she had been looked after I hadn't realised until she told me that the home was run by MHA Methodist homes that have pioneered new ways of caring for others.

In this season of hope we can give thanks for those who recognising a need have used the best research and understanding not to exploit others but to treat them with the Christ-like dignity that God wants all his children to enjoy.

Amen.