

Keep Your Eyes On the Prize

Servetus Society June 2, 2013

Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 108; John 18:33-38; Revelation 22:1-7, 10-21

Conventional interpretation is turned inside out when oppressed people apply Jesus's life and teachings to their own daily experience. "Deliverance" becomes "liberation from injustice" in this life instead of "salvation from hell" in the next life. For example, *The Gospel in Solentiname*.¹ Solentiname was a monastic community founded by Ernesto Cardenal – a Jesuit priest who was a student of Thomas Merton. He acted as Minister of Culture in the government of Daniel Ortega after the Nicaragua revolution that threw out Somoza in the 1980s. *The Gospel in Solentiname* is a four-volume memoir of a Bible study that met daily with Ernesto to discuss the Christian story contained in the four Gospels. In this brief excerpt, the group is discussing the story of Jesus before Pilate in John 18:33-38.

Pilate asked him: "Am I perchance a Jew? Those of your nation and the chief priests are the ones who delivered you to me. What have you done? Then Jesus answered: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my followers would have fought so that I would not be turned over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not here."

Ernesto: He's telling him that his kingdom is political, but not with an army. You have to know what the word "world" means in St. John's Gospel: it

¹Cardenal, 218-240.

means sin, the world of injustice, the established order that we now call “the system.” . . . The proof that Jesus gives to Pilate, that his kingdom is not of this world, is that his followers have not fought to keep him from becoming a prisoner. . . It seems to me that if he had assured Pilate that his kingdom was not political, but “spiritual,” Pilate wouldn’t have condemned him. But Pilate was not reassured. He asked again:

“So you’re a king?” Jesus answered: “I’m a king, as you say. I was born for this and for this I came into the world, to say what is the truth. All those who obey the truth listen to what I say.”

Olivia: It seems to me that when they heard ‘Kingdom,’ all they thought of was a kingdom of injustice like their own kingdom, and he’s telling them that their kingdom is a kingdom of love. But that didn’t suit them either, the kingdom of love, because love is against injustice; and that’s why the powerful still go on being against this kingdom of love; this revolution of love; they always fight against it because it doesn’t suit them. For them the kingdom of love is subversion.

Another: The kingdom of God is liberty, and all the other kingdoms are oppression. That’s why he has to make a distinction; that’s why he says his kingdom’s not part of that system. . . .

Another: If he’d said his revolution was inward or that he was coming to have rich and poor alike converted, not a damned thing would have happened to him.

Ernesto: Like that Protestant biblical magazine that’s around here, very attractive (they won’t ban it, it’s not subversive). It says the world is full of injustice, and that the Bible is against injustice, which is true; but

afterwards it says the boss must check whether he's unjust toward the worker, and the worker whether he's unjust toward the boss.

Manuel: [laughing] How is Jesus going to say the worker is unjust toward the boss?

Another: They think the work belongs to the boss, as in the time of Jesus Christ they thought the person belonged to the master; if the slave escaped, it was unfair, because he was stealing himself from his owner.

The story of Paul and Silas and their miraculous escape from prison is part of the canon of Black Liberation theology in the struggle for human rights in the United States.

In 1956, civil rights activist Alice Wine set the story of Paul and Silas's miraculous release to the traditional tune, "Gospel Plow," also known as "Hold On," or "Keep Your Hand on the Plow." That hymn was composed in the nineteenth century, and is also part of the Black Liberation canon. The scripture reference is Luke 9:62: "Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Alice Wine's lyric connects two centuries of struggle and evokes the racial, tribal memory of exile, slavery, and oppression dating back to the Hebrew people's exodus from Egypt:

Am
Paul and Silas bound in jail
Am
Had no money for to go their bail
Am Em
Keep your eyes on the prize Hold on

Paul and Silas thought they was lost
Dungeon shook and the chains fell off
Keep your eyes on the prize Hold on

G Am
Hold on, hold on
Am Em
Keep your eyes on the prize Hold on,
hold on

[Sing it]

The only thing that we did was wrong
Was stayin' in the wilderness too long
Keep your eyes on the prize Hold on

The only thing we did was right
Was the day we begun to fight
Keep your eyes on the prize Hold on

Hold on, hold on
Keep your eyes on the prize
Hold on, hold on

Freedom's name is mighty sweet
One day soon we're gonna meet
Keep your eyes on the prize Hold on

Got my hand on the gospel plow
Won't take nothing for my journey
now
Keep your eyes on the prize Hold on

Hold on, hold on
Keep your eyes on the prize
Hold on, hold on

The reference to the “gospel plow” sends those who know it back to the original idea: You can't look back or you will lose your way – whether you are following Moses through the wilderness to the promised land, following the drinking gourd along the underground railroad to safety in nineteenth century North America, or preparing to go out into the streets to protest the denial of civil and human rights in the mid-twentieth century South.

Let's look at the whole story.

Paul and Silas were not exactly hanging out with the poor and dispossessed in Philippi. Paul and his entourage ended up staying at the home of a woman named Lydia. Lydia was probably a Pagan Greek who had accepted the Jewish God, probably participated in Synagogue worship, but had not converted to Judaism. She must have been a powerful woman, too powerful for the later patriarchal church leaders to ignore when Luke put the story together – although they did suppress her actual name. “Lydia” is the name of the region where she lived. She was a dealer in purple cloth – which was the royal or imperial color, so her business would have been in demand. She was likely unmarried, head of a household, and enjoyed a fairly high social and economic status. After she and her household were baptized, she was hostess to Paul and Silas, both before and after their stint in prison. Lydia was very probably a major benefactor or sponsor, or patroness of the Apostle Paul.

A slave girl, who had the gift of divination – fortune-telling and perhaps prophecy – was bringing in a lot of money for her owners. Paul got annoyed with her following them around and yelling about being slaves to God, so he caused her to lose her ability. Luke would have us believe it was the magic of the Holy Spirit, wielded by Paul. Perhaps he just pointed out that she could step into the Kingdom of God and find her own personal liberation. But however it happened, the people who had been exploiting her were not amused. Paul and Silas were hauled before the magistrate and accused of disturbing their cozy economic system, and going against Roman custom and law.

While Paul and Silas are leading the rest of the prisoners in song and prayer, an earthquake shakes the prison, and all the doors open and all the chains and shackles drop away. It is a classic Christian myth. God has intervened, and saved his people. But freedom from bondage is not the end of the story. The prisoners don't run away. Instead, they liberate the jailer as well. Not only that, when the town leaders want to just quietly get rid of Paul and Silas, Paul says not so fast: the town leaders are held accountable for their illegal actions against citizens of Rome. Out of fear that they have really screwed up, they apologize to Paul and Silas for their ill treatment, but they are not offered, and don't accept, Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The unanswered question is, why not?

Perhaps, as Olivia said, the kingdom of love didn't suit them because love is against injustice. "That's why the powerful still go on being against this kingdom of love, this revolution of love. They always fight against it because it doesn't suit them. For them the kingdom of love is subversion."

Deliverance is not an interventionist god causing an earthquake that sets us free. Deliverance is acting with integrity regardless of the circumstances. Paul and the other prisoners do not run away. They wait for the jailer to show up, and then they invite him to join them in partnership for justice-compassion. But when the magistrates are confronted with the choice, they protect their own self-interest. Paul doesn't bother to invite them to participate in God's justice-compassion. The magistrates have already made their choice clear.

For John of Patmos, who wrote the Revelation, the solution to Rome's imperial, systemic, retributive justice was the hope for violent payback, to be brought by the return of Jesus who would liberate all true believers and take them home with him to God, while annihilating the evil doers in a final conflagration. The Revelation sets out the violent alternative in the struggle for liberation from injustice in this life. Paul and Silas do not resort to violence. But they do leave the magistrates stuck in the consequences of the violence they have resorted to in order to save their economic system.

That's what I would call the true judgment of God: Here and now, we have a choice: non-violent justice and life, or violent injustice, oppression, and death.

Now let's sing the Queen's Prayer – written from prison by the last Queen of the Hawai'ian people. I chose it for two reasons: One, because it reminds us of the continuing struggle for justice of the native Hawa'ian people. Mike and I learned this hymn from our good friend Mahina Bailey, who was a leader in the Hawai'ian and Pacific peoples community. He was a member of Hope United Church of Christ, and a wonderful advocate of Hawai'ian culture – especially Hula.

The song also gives us a chance to say “Aloha” and God-Speed to our friend Marvelle. Marvelle and Ed will be moving to Hawaii at the end of this month. Here is a translation of the first verse:

“Your loving mercy is in heaven and your truth so perfect. I live imprisoned in sorrow; you are my light, your glory, my support. Behold not with malevolence the sins of humankind, but forgive and cleanse. And so O Lord, beneath your wings protect us and let peace be our portion now and forever more.”