

April 22, 2007

Sunday of the Myrrh-Bearers

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Of the three years (roughly 52-55) that St. Paul spent in Ephesus (Acts 20:31), we can account for only 27 months (19:8-10). This calculation leaves nine months unexplained. Some historians have suggested that Paul was in prison at Ephesus during that remaining time, an experience perhaps indicated by his having "fought with beasts in Asia" (1 Corinthians 15:32). I have always thought this an attractive and helpful suggestion.

Many of those that hold this view also believe that Paul wrote the Epistle to the Philippians during that imprisonment. This has long been my own position.

While imprisoned in Ephesus during those nine or so months, Paul learned something important about his ministry. Whereas imprisonment would seem to be a considerable hindrance to the proclamation of the Gospel, the Apostle discovered the very opposite to be the case. He found that his time in confinement led, rather, to the advantage of the Gospel. During this imprisonment Paul wrote, "But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear" (Philippians 1:12-14).

The word translated as "palace guard" in the NKJV ("headquarters" in the NEB, "barracks" in *The Living Bible*) is *praetorium*, the Greek equivalent of the Latin *praetorium*. Roman governors were normally guarded by such a group, as we see at Jerusalem (Mark 15:16) and at Caesarea (Acts 23:35). Paul was under the custody of such a guard at Ephesus, where the governor of Asia resided.

In prison, then, the disadvantage of Paul became the advantage of the Gospel. Indeed, how else would these official Roman guards ever have heard the Gospel unless Paul had been their prisoner? This is what the Apostle learned in prison, and it was but another example of strength being made perfect in infirmity (2 Corinthians 12:9).

There is a special irony in Paul's writing these things to the church at Philippi, and the irony consists in this: Among the Philippian Christians sitting in church that day, listening to this epistle being read in public for the first time, was a family that understood exactly, and by experience, what Paul was saying—the family of the Philippian jailer.

When this epistle was read at Philippi, this Christian family could not but remember a certain night only a few years earlier. They had all been sleeping soundly in their

beds when they were awakened by a sudden and considerable hubbub in the middle of the night. First, "there was a great earthquake" (Acts 16:26). This surely would have been disturbing enough, but shortly afterwards there was even more commotion.

The husband and father of the household, who was the city jailer, unexpectedly arrived back home, bringing two men with him. These, it turned out, were prisoners, incarcerated the previous day because of some obscure public disturbance (16:16-24).

Now, however, the father of this family suddenly appeared on the scene, and he had these men with him. Something rather exciting seemed to be happening. The jailer father, who was manifestly quite agitated, came in carrying a light (16:29). Next he washed the wounds of the two men (16:33), who had yesterday been very badly beaten with rods (16:22).

Then the whole family sat down and listened to the two prisoners, whose names were Paul and Silas. Whatever had happened back at the jail, the family could see that their father had been much impressed by it. They sat and listened, then, to what the two men had to say (16:32). At the end of it, the head of the household pronounced faith in someone called "the Lord Jesus Christ" (16:31), and then the whole family submitted to something called baptism (16:33). Afterwards they sat down to eat.

In the years that followed, the family's identity and history were determined by the events of that night. They gradually learned the significance of that teaching, that baptism, and the family's new relationship with "the Lord Jesus Christ."

Now this Paul had written a letter to the congregation at Philippi, of which they were among the original members, ever since that night when the writer of it had been their father's prisoner.

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