

**Jailhouse Rock**  
**Bible reading: Acts 16.24-40**

*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God,  
and the prisoners were listening to them. Acts 16.25.*

Liliana was used to feeling like a non-person. As a teenager, growing up in Ceausescu's Romania, she had learned that you had to fight to maintain your sense of self-worth in the face of officialdom. And then, coming to the West as a postgrad, she discovered (so she told me) that "If you travel on a Romanian passport, everyone treats you like dirt." So here we were, on our way to a conference in the USA, stranded at Schiphol airport because our plane from Manchester had missed the daily KLM flight to Boston. The airline could put us up in a hotel overnight — except that Liliana's passport didn't allow her to leave the airport. At that point, the officials on the desk lost interest — she'd just have to sit up in the airport all night. Surely, I said politely, she could get a temporary visa? Try immigration — next desk, said the official. Next please. So we went to talk to the immigration clerk, a tall, blond young man with that special air of superciliousness. Yes, she could get a visa — but only if she had a hotel reservation. But she couldn't get the hotel reservation without the visa. Etc, etc. You get the picture. In the end, it got sorted — but it opened my eyes. Most of us take for granted the freedom to travel the world (or we used to!), and expect to be treated with some kind of dignity. But travel can be a very different experience if you have the wrong kind of passport — or the wrong colour skin.

Travelling in the Roman Empire should have been easy for Paul. Being a Roman citizen should have earned him the respect of officialdom — especially in Philippi, where the officials were Romans themselves. But somehow Paul ends up on the wrong side of the law. Maybe it was the company he was keeping — the people he respected. Lydia, the Asian trader in luxury fabrics, meeting by the river to pray with her Jewish friends (vv.14-15). Or the prophetic slave-girl who was being treated as a circus act by her owners, telling fortunes on the streets — until Paul stopped them treating her as a commodity — by treating her as a human being (vv.16-19).

"Once he crossed the threshold, he was no longer in charge." A shrewd comment from a newspaper report last week on the trial of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel. That was Paul's experience too. He finds himself stripped of all human dignity, publicly flogged, and manacled to a beam in the innermost cell of the town jail — hot, dark, foetid and smelly (vv.19-24). Having taken that step of faith to "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (v.9), having crossed over to Europe after that long, fruitless trip through Asia, and made one convert, most of us would want to ask, Where is God in all this? Yet Paul and Silas find the courage not only to pray (privately, desperately, silently), but to sing hymns (v.25) — an act of public fellowship and defiance in lockdown. Feeling the first tremors of the earthquake, trapped in that airless cell, must have seemed like the last straw. But it's an act of God (literally!), leaving the doors gaping open and the manacles broken. There's a greater power than the Empire at work here.

So Paul could have been forgiven for taking those gaping prison doors as an invitation to escape, leaving the hapless jailer to face the music. But officials are human beings too — and Paul has a job to do before he leaves.

Finally, v.25 is a special word for the choir who have been sharing a “Hymn for the Day” on WhatsApp and providing virtual (and real!) singing in our isolated lockdown lives.

God bless, Loveday.