

WORLD DAY OF PRAYER, 2010

SERMON : ACTS 16 : 16-34; PS 150

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke shows how, by breaking the multiform barriers which existed between different people, God brought closer the human being, those from different tribes, different sexes and those who are “pure” or “impure” (Acts 10-11,18). The God of the Acts is thus universal. For this reason the mission of Paul, can overflow the framework of Jerusalem to spread itself in Philippi, the main city of Macedonia in the Roman empire which is populated by colons (16,20). In this city where they came to preach the Gospel, Paul and Silas are put in prison after being beaten.

The reason which is given seems logic: they disturb the city. But in the reality, the problem is the one of sad and ashamed question of money. Indeed, the reason of the troubles of the missionaries (Paul and Silas) is the release of a young slave girl who had a spirit of divination (v16). The word translated by divination means literally Python. Beyond the testimony that she seems to return to the men of God (v.17), this young girl was doubly possessed. She was had by the spirit of the Python which gave her the capacity of divination, but she was also had by her Masters who owned her as a slave and who lived from the fruit of her divination. Exceeded by the harassing of this maidservant, Paul exorcized her and the bad spirit left her, making her losing her capacity of divination; clearly the capacity to make easy money for her Masters.

The apostles are accused to break the local traditions while bringing a new religion; this accusation seems in accordance with the regulations in the Roman empire: in fact, in the Roman world, proselitism of a new religion is prohibited: the Jews could make propaganda in the other nations, but not among Romans, and thus in Philippe a Roman colony which is controlled by the Roman law. The apostles, whom one is unaware of the Roman origin, are shown to bring a new religion which goes against the economic structures organized in the Roman colony. In fact, the release that Paul and Silas bring makes twists to people who benefit from the situation of the young girl. By releasing her, Paul makes disappear great money possibilities, because the latter will not be any more able to function so as to enrich her Masters. Also, she will not be any more useful economically speaking. The reaction of the Masters, far from being religious or patriotic, is indeed, the protection of their egoistic interest.

In Cameroun like in many countries, there is a lot of interdicts which seem to be a kind of reaction against liberation which is brought by the Gospel; the taboos are related either to the sex, to the age or to the class. Women are not allowed to reach some spaces that are reserved to men; they should not perform certain jobs etc. Young people also should not claim some responsibilities when the old men are still present, as this African proverb suggests it: “the porcupine will never be adult as long as his father is still alive”.

In Africa and in Cameroon, there are charming men whose wives, sisters and moms are proud because of their aptitude to work for their blooming. But there are also many who, in the name of the protection of a certain traditional culture, the “purely African culture”, endeavour to maintain women and children in a situation of slavery which profit to them. They are still numerous who think that the young girl should not go to school, because her future will

be played in the husband house where she will see herself locked up as in a prison and maintained in ignorance in order to belong, like an object, only to her man. They are still numerous who think that “women and children are their riches” in the economic sense of the word, because they constitute a powerful and free workforce; cultivating, or selling “bayam sellam” (street hawker), working (for those who studied) to nourish them, to take care of them, and to give them even money to look after mistresses. The slavery of the young girls who move from rural areas to work in the families downtown, and whose unimportant remuneration is rather versed to the parents remained in the village registers in this order.

There is also a typical exploitation of young people in a context of poverty where, in the name of the self employment and of the encouragement of the small trades (which are salutary), the system does not sufficiently take care to control and to punish the owners who make abuses. I am talking about the slavery of men and especially young people who are exploited by intrepid owners, who do not pay their workmen and who are played of young people while recruiting and dismissing every three months (those who claim their money) in order to enrich quickly by the blood of the poor.

In many contexts, speaking about Women's Liberation to this category of men (and even to some women) and of morals to these owners, is a scandal which does not enter their operating rules; it is a sacrilege because Liberation, Regulation and Morals are against shameful advantages and facilities. Paul and Silas, conscious of the prohibitions choose to “obey God rather than any human authority”. They are men of faith who had courage to challenge in the name of God, a system which oppresses and which reduces to slavery certain human beings: they are beaten

and imprisoned to have presented justice in the middle of injustice. In their prison, they do not complain and does not precipitate to leave on the first occasion. But, shameless and without fear they feel free to testify their faith; much more, they use their prison like a worship appropriateness.

Our text, by presenting with many details the tribulations by which they pass, like their attitude of praise, of prayer and perseverance, is an interpellation for all the persons (women and men, girl and boy) who, in difficulty claim justice everywhere. Expressing love to the torturers (v.28), praising the Lord in the subsoil of a prison, praying without resigning oneself in the middle of misery is an attitude which makes it possible to break the multiform barriers so that the message of the salvation can be heard, as well for oppressed (v35-40) as for the oppressor (v29-32), even in the most hostile places that a prison. Praising is not reserved only to people without problems; the happy ones and the unhappy are call to worship the Lord: “Let everything that breath praise the Lord”. Amen