

25th Sunday of Year A (2014)
Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

Today we have listened to the first of four passages which we will hear from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Last week we completed reading from Paul's Epistle to the Romans, his most theological, densest work; now we turn to Paul at his most cheerful. The letter evokes the warm affection Paul had for the Christians in this northern Greek town; the first Church he established on the mainland of Europe.

The Acts of the Apostles tells us that Paul crossed to Greece from Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) after he had a vision. He would have landed at Neapolis and moved up the *Via Egnatia* to the regional centre of Philippi. There he met a group of women who were 'God-fearers', people sympathetic to Judaism but who had not taken the step of conversion. They formed the basis of Paul's new community.

Philippi was an ancient city, re-founded and renamed in his own honour by Philip, King of Macedon and father of Alexander the Great. It was the site of the battle at which Octavian and Marc Antony avenged the murder of Julius Caesar by defeating Brutus and Cassius. Octavian, soon to be Emperor Augustus, settled veteran troops there and it became a Roman colony, where Latin as well as Greek would have been heard in the streets.

Paul writes to his colleagues from prison. A question which scholars have long pondered is: which period of imprisonment was it? Paul served a number of stretches in gaol. Including in Philippi. On that occasion an earthquake freed the prisoners from their chains but they did not move from the cells. The astonished gaoler, on the point of killing himself, imagining his shame at his prisoners escaping, was halted by Paul's shouts. In relief he took his captives home and he and his whole household were converted and baptised. Paul later received from the governor an apology for his treatment. As a Roman citizen he should not have been so humiliated. But he was nevertheless asked to leave the city. He had however established the foundations for a robust Christian community, which would last many decades.

So which prison was he in when he penned this missive? I can appreciate that this is not the most momentous question on your mind when you were on your way here today. But the answer has implications for us as Christians.

There are three possible places of incarceration for Paul as letter writer of this epistle. We know he spent time in clink in Caesarea, a port-city on the Mediterranean coast of Palestine built by Herod the Great, after Paul, accused by Jews in Jerusalem, had appealed for his case to be heard by Caesar. We also know he was under house-arrest in Rome as he awaited trial; and it is likely that his situation will have worsened as Christians came under threat during Nero's reign as Emperor. Thirdly, Ephesus, then on the coast of what is now Turkey has gained scholarly support as the place of Paul's imprisonment since communications with Philippi, referred to several times in the

letter, would have been much more straightforward than in the case of Caesarea or Rome.

However, if Paul wrote this letter from prison in Rome his words become very poignant as that would make this letter one of his last. Although he expects soon to be freed from his chains, he left his Roman cell only to go to his execution, by tradition placed at *Tre Fontane*, outside Rome on the Road to Ostia. In which case his words in today's passage about wanting to go and be with Christ would soon be realised.

Since his encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road, Paul has known that his destiny was to be with Christ and it is an appointment he longs to keep. Nevertheless he feels a strong responsibility to those he has brought to Christ and while there is work to do to support them then he will remain to do it.

This mix of motivations: a desire to be with Christ and a desire to act for the people of Christ, a longing for heaven and an acceptance of life on earth, should be a powerful mix in the hearts of each of us. Dying is not a disaster for the Christian, unless it is cruel and untimely. Death as the peaceful conclusion to a well-lived life is to be welcomed. The natural segue of a life lived for God's people is life lived with God for all eternity.

Paul affirms this truth from his prison-cell. Chains and bars and brutality do not suppress his conviction and his hope. Christ is his constant companion, in his confinement and always, as he is ours.