

No magic python
Acts 16.16-18

Christians are sometimes very damning about those people who keep a sort of foot in the Christian door, just in case there might be something in it. They don't really believe, but they might as well cover themselves just in case. Those kind of half - or quarter-believers are fairly common, I am afraid. But are those of us with more faith any less two-faced about other things? Take for example this business of horoscopes and the like. They are incredibly popular, you know. People who produce papers and magazines only put in them what they know the great British public will buy. And the majority of the great British public buy papers and magazines with horoscopes in them. What is more they read them, and still more terrifyingly, whilst often saying 'It's just a bit of fun' - they actually do take some notice of them. It is easy enough to slap this down in a superficial kind of way - you know Donald Swann's lovely song:

I gaze at the planets in wonder,
and the time and effort they expend
All to warn me to be careful
in dealings involving a friend.

But that won't do. Is there anything in it? Does your birth sign matter? It seems to do so for a lot of people. What are we as Christians to make of it?

I was of course provoked into thinking about this by the first reading today - and the story of the slave-girl that Paul and Silas met in Philippi. She is described in the various English translations as a soothsayer, as having an evil spirit, or an oracular spirit. What the Greek actually says is that she had a Python Spirit - which means she was involved in the cult of the oracle of Delphi. In Greek mythology Apollo slew the great snake Python who guarded the oracle. So she was a pagan, who was used, because she had this gift of second sight, as a money-making racket by her owners. Now there is no suggestion that she was a charlatan, or that it was all nonsense. That kind of dismissiveness does not really tackle the problem. In fact, what this girl says is the absolute truth - 'Here are servants of the Most High God: they have come to tell you how to be saved.' They couldn't argue with that. But in fact they found it offensive, and commanded the spirit to come out of her. Whatever the mechanics of that (and I don't want to get side-tracked into what exorcism was about, and what it is today) - the fact is that after they said what they said, she was no longer able to foretell the future, and she was useless to her owners, and quite reasonably, in a sense, they took Paul and Silas to court for ruining their business. It stands as a warning that the right thing can be said to the wrong person, and for the wrong purpose.

Just because a thing is true, it doesn't necessarily mean that it is right. We have the technical capability, for example, to make a neutron bomb that could kill people whilst leaving buildings intact. It could be done. It doesn't mean it is right to do it. that is another issue entirely.

So, you see, it could be that there is something is astrology. It could be there is something in spiritualism. It could be there is something is white magic and witchcraft and the like. All those things are happening around us today. The horoscopes are in the paper. Most large towns have a Spiritualist church, and witchcraft is quite widely practised. There might be something in it. But that doesn't mean to say that it is right. And the Christian's response, if he is claiming, as we do in the Creed, to believe in the apostolic faith, is to follow the teaching of the apostles, and indeed not only their teaching, but their example. So these things are not just something to be laughed at, or tolerated as a harmless aberration. The apostles saw this girl as a manifestation of what Christ had overcome. Now in our day and age we are far less subject to these things than Paul and his contemporaries were. But they needed to assert the Easter message about them - that the conquest of death means that Jesus had overcome all the powers that people thought were controlling them. Paul has two wonderful images of it - one is that they are being paraded in Christ's victory procession like the prisoners the victorious generals brought back from a war. Then there is that amazing ending to Chapter 8 of the letter to the Romans - 'I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' The words don't carry quite the same meanings for us - Paul was listing these supernatural forces that his contemporaries feared controlled their lives.

It is possible to read the great sweep of Old Testament history as a fight of faith in God against faith in magic. Egypt was totally dominated by those beliefs (think of Pharaoh and his dreams), and so were the nations who inhabited the Promised Land when the Israelites arrived there. The battles with those nations were as much to do with defeating sorcery and magic with true faith as with swords and shields. So the Old Testament law books are strongly condemnatory about these things. 'You must not practice divination or magic. Do not have recourse to the spirits of the dead, or to magicians; they will defile you. If a man has recourse to the spirits of the dead or to magicians, to prostitute himself by following them, I shall set my face against that man.' I could go on and on with such quotations. To turn to magic is to turn away from God. The fight against magic is the fight against false gods. King Mannaseh is condemned for dabbling with the spirits. The most famous example is Saul and his consultation with the medium at Endor. But there are many examples which are almost imperceptible to our ears. King Asa was struck down when he was thirty-nine with a disease 2 Chronicles tells us, and what is more, in his sickness he turned not to the Lord, but - to Doctors! Now that is not a prescription for the Mary Baker Eddy Christian Scientist refusal to use medical science. It is because the doctors of his day would have used magic, not medicine as we know it. They were closer to witch doctors than GPs.

The New Testament does little to change that - the magicians continue to be the baddies of the stories. They need healing and conversion, and they deserve no respect at all. But they are not condemned as charlatans. It is not that what they say and do is not possible or true - at least in part. But it may be the evidence of the truth of evil. The truth of Jesus is something which puts those other truths in the shade. Many scholars think that the whole business of the Magi coming to visit Jesus was added to the story because it implies that they brought the things used in the magic of the day - gold, frankincense and myrrh, and laid them at the feet of Jesus - they were not longer needed or relevant.

Christians are prey to these issues just as much as anyone else. Paul could have said of the woman in the story 'Hey, fantastic, this woman has seen what we are about - let her keep it up! People obviously respect her insight - maybe that will help us in our preaching.' But no, he saw what she was doing as evil. Look around you at the magic which is taken for granted as harmless - the horoscopes are only one manifestation. People cross their fingers, look for four-leafed clovers, black cats, they have lucky pixies in their cars, crystals in their home, employ an expert in Feng Shui to sort out their office - the list goes on and on. If we allow any of these things to go unchallenged, we are saying in effect 'God is not in charge - these things are.' And if we allow others to go on about them unchallenged, then we confirm their myth that our faith is a lot of mumbo-jumbo as well. The Easter season is drawing to an end - it is the season of the victory of Christ over sin, death, and evil. Thursday was Ascension Day, when we celebrated Christ crowned the eternal King of heaven. We look forward to next Sunday, and the celebration of the coming of the Spirit. We need to celebrate the Easter victory in a world which doesn't seem to believe it is real, but is prepared to take seriously where Mars and Venus are, and which direction your office desk should face in. Christ is in control, not these other things.