

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Christmas Year B 2020 Isa 61:10-62:3, **Galatians 4:4-7**, Luke 2:22-40 **Scott MALCOLM**

Spartacus.

Originally thought from modern day Bulgaria, one of the 1 million slaves in the Roman Empire around the years of Jesus birth. Sold to a gladiatorial school, becoming famous as a dangerous and fierce competitor, like Russell Crowe's character in the movie, the Gladiator.

Spartacus and a band of other fighters escaped their slavery and began a guerrilla war against the Roman army. For two years he and his ever-growing band of disaffected slaves, caused murder and mayhem all over the Roman Empire, winning many victories against armies and forces, bigger and better equipped than they were.

But it couldn't last and eventually they were defeated by a Roman army, numbering 48,000, on the way to Sicily in 71BC.

Some of you may also be aware that there was a very violent and raunchy tv series made about Spartacus here in New Zealand. It wasn't flash TV, the acting wasn't great and it was violent and explicit ... but, it made me think about what it was like to be a slave at the time of Jesus and the early church.

One of those 1 million. Men and women who built and maintained that huge super power. On whose blood, sweat, and tears, that horrifying dominance was constructed.

Women and men who had no say in their lives, not what they did, or didn't do. Not over their time, over their youth, their strength or children, over those they loved. Not over their minds, their knowledge or their religious life. Men and women whose bodies belonged to someone else.

The tv series gave an insight in to what it was like for them, and, it was pretty grim. They were chattels not children, goods not girls, muscle not men. Workers not women. They were brought and sold like a cow or a pig, or discarded like old clothes, depending on the wealth of the master or mistress.

This is the world the gospel arrives in.

Consequently, slaves come into the church. People who are owned by other people. People whose lives are not their own, people who have no control over what they do or is done to them.

They are loved by God, yet under the complete control of their earthly masters. Their lives are truly in the hands of others. This is what Paul is speaking of in our reading from Galatians this morning.

That just like these slaves, all of us, Jews and Gentiles were once in the power of others, or other things.

These slaves are called God's sons and daughters, but not sons and daughters only, but heirs. Those who in Paul's time inherited everything. God call's these heirs ... and by inference us all ...

Inheritors of all.

This is what redemption means for everyone. Moving from slave to heir.

Real slaves became Christians, and they were heirs, Paul says, with all of their weaknesses, and frailties, their inability to live rightly, morally, justly, because they didn't have the power to do so.

They couldn't keep a spiritual, ethical or moral code ... to do that may have meant death, or worse. In spite of this, Paul says, they are loved by God. Belong to God. These ... and all people.

They are, in the prophet's words, "a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God."

These slaves, and all people belong to God, not by the law, not by circumcision, not by birth or status ... but by faith in the grace and generosity of God, in Jesus the Messiah.

This is the real gift of Christmas.

This is what Simeon and Anna saw.

This is the gospel of Christ.

The transformation of the world, from slavery to son and daughtership.

From bondage to beauty.

From scratching around for breakfast scraps, to feasting at the marriage supper of the lamb.

Beautiful clothes. Jewels. A crown.

A new name.

Who of these early Christian slaves could possibly have imagined, what had happened to them,

"when, in the fullness of time, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those, ... so all might receive adoption as children. So, you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child ... then also an heir..."

The inheritor of all.

This, is the real gift of Christmas ... the gospel of Christ!

Thanks be to God.