ST PAUL'S FIRST VISIT TO PHILIPPI

(Acts of the Apostles XVI.11–40)

Philippi was the first place in Europe where the gospel was preached by an apostle, as far as our certain knowledge goes. St Paul's visit to it was therefore more momentous than Julius Caesar's landing in Britain or Columbus's arrival in America.

The spot where Philippi stood is now almost deserted. It is in the north-east of modern Greece, not far from Salonika, and some twenty miles south of the modern town of Drama. Paul and his companions landed at a little port, Neapolis, now called Cavalla, and travelling ten miles inland came to Philippi. It was a small town, on the edge of a perfectly level plain largely covered with forests and surrounded by mountains, which rose in places to 6,000 feet. The town lay on a gentle slope beneath a rocky spur of the mountains. Its ancient walls not only enclosed its streets, but climbed the precipitous rock to its summit (some hundreds of feet high) on which a mighty castle, the citadel of Philippi, stood frowning down on the plain.

The place had had an interesting history.[1] Some eight centuries or more before Christ, gold and silver had been discovered in the neighbouring mountains. The Greek settlers on the nearby island of Thasos had obtained from the Thracian chiefs or princes a concession to exploit the metals, and in time derived great wealth from the mines. Other Greek states later contended for possession of the rich territory. Athens eventually planted a colony on the site of Philippi, but a few years later, in 356 B.C., this was seized by Philip the crafty king of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great. Philip turned the place into a strong fortress by building its walls and citadel, and called it Philippi after his own name. His successors on the throne of Macedonia derived a large income from the mines for some generations, but in time the precious metals were exhausted and Philippi sank in importance.

Then occurred an event which made its name world famous. In 42 B.C., some ninety years before St Paul came, there were fought just outside the town the two great battles which finally decided that the Roman Empire was to be a monarchy and not a republic. Brutus and Cassius, the republicans who had killed Julius Caesar two years earlier, held the town with a great army encamped on the plain a mile from it, and were attacked by the forces led by Caesar's nephew

[1] Paul Collart, in his excellent book, *Philippes* (1937) describes the ruins and history of Philippi.

(afterwards the Emperor Augustus) and by Mark Antony. At least 150,000 men fought in the battle. The last scenes of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* give a vivid picture of it, and call forth our pity for the sad fate of Brutus and his melancholy resignation to it :

> The ghost of Caesar hath appeared to me
> Two several times by night ; at Sardis once ;
> And this last night here in Philippi fields.
> I know my hour is come.

The republicans were defeated with terrible slaughter, and their two leaders took their own lives. Some years later a plain triumphal arch, thirty-five feet high, was built in the centre of the battlefield, on the great road leading to the west. Paul would have passed through it when he left Philippi. It was still standing a hundred years ago, but has now fallen.

Antony at once settled some of his disbanded soldiers in the town and twelve years later Augustus sent a number of Italian civilians, of the farmer class, to join them, and organized the place as a *colonia*, giving it all the structure and privileges of a Roman town in Italy, and placing all the adjoining land under its jurisdiction. The settlers set about trying to cultivate the fertile plain, most of which had not been tilled before. But for fifty years the neighbouring Thracian tribes were frequently at war with Rome or with one another, and would hardly have spared the foreigners whose presence they no doubt resented. The crops and farms in the plain must often have been destroyed, but the stout walls and energy of the colonists saved the town from capture. We may well believe however that their chief source of livelihood in this period was the valuable timber on the mountain-sides. After A.D. 26 a better period came, though a last great revolt of the Thracians took place in 44 only six years before Paul's visit in A.D. 50. The citizens must still have been nervous about their safety, but in fact a long period of peace had now begun, and prosperity soon followed. The plain was in time covered with farms and villages and the town spread eastwards in a large suburb. But all this was after St Paul's visit.

On the lower ground, which alone was habitable, the walls enclosed a space of about half a mile square. Near the centre of this was the Forum or central square (wrongly called "market-place" in our translation). It was here that Paul and Silas were flogged, and the prison was probably not far away. The remains of this Forum are known to lie beneath those of a larger and much later Forum whose foundations have been discovered. Most of the buildings whose traces have been uncovered date from after St Paul's time ; the two

great exceptions are the triumphal arch already mentioned, and the theatre, whose remains are substantially those of the theatre of Philip's city, altered, but not rebuilt by the Romans. It is in the usual Greek form, an open-air theatre shaped like a half-saucer. Paul must have seen it and passed near it.

St Paul arrived with three companions, Silas, Timothy and Luke. Timothy was very young and this was his first journey with Paul. Luke may have been a Christian for some time, but Paul seems to have only recently met with him. Luke was the author of *Acts* and in this chapter we must remember that he was himself at Philippi when the events related by him took place. Although Greek was a good deal spoken in the streets of Philippi (as well as the rough Thracian language of which we know little), yet it was a Roman town and Latin, a language of which Paul probably knew little or nothing, was the prevailing tongue, and continued to be so for two hundred years. This is proved by the fact that the majority of *private* inscriptions are in Latin. It is likely that Paul had never been in such a Roman atmosphere before. Among the remains at Philippi from this date, there seems to be nothing relating to Jewish residents or worship. The Greek cities of the empire, up to the Christian era, seem to have been generally tolerant towards the Jews, but Roman sentiment towards them was narrower and much more unfriendly. The whole passage about Philippi gives us the impression that there were very few Jews there, and that the authorities discouraged their coming. The few that were there, or that observed their religious duties, were mainly women, as it seems, who used to meet on the sabbath outside the town gate at some sort of small synagogue near one of the many brooks that had their source at the foot of the hill.[1] Paul, following his usual custom, spoke to those who were present, and did so on more than one occasion. Lydia, the only convert mentioned from among the worshippers, was not a Jewess, but one of that class of pagans who attended Jewish worship without accepting the whole Jewish religion. Her home was in Asia Minor, and she too would be a comparatively unimportant person in that Roman city. Other converts probably followed, for we have clear evidence that immediately after St Paul's departure he left a whole group of devoted Christians.[2]

After some days or weeks came the incident which brought Paul

[1] St Luke in his narration twice uses the word *proseuche* (translated "prayer" or "place of prayer") to denote this meeting-place. This word is frequently used by Jewish writers (and sometimes by pagan ones) as a mere alternative word for "synagogue" but this is the only passage in the New Testament where it means a place. This may be due to pure accident, and we must not insist that it *cannot* mean a synagogue of any sort, but only an open-air enclosure or garden. It may mean either an ordinary synagogue, or an inferior or minor synagogue perhaps without a recognized rabbi, or just a place of prayer in the open. [2] See Philipp. IV.15.

and Silas into collision with the town authorities, the cure of the demoniac slave-girl. Her owners were clearly Roman citizens, and full citizens of Philippi. They brought the two apostles before the chief magistrates, the duovirs. The accusation treats the two as ordinary Jews, and breathes the usual Roman hatred of Jews. It assumes that Jewish propaganda was illegal at Philippi—the recent ban even on Jewish *worship* in Rome was doubtless known at Philippi. The duovirs ordered the two to be flogged. At this point the apostles must have declared that they were Roman citizens and that therefore nobody in Macedonia except the governor could issue such an order. (Unless Paul had made this plea now, his indignant protest next day would have been unjust.) But the duovirs treated this declaration as false and, without examining it further, inflicted the flogging then and there, in the Forum.

Then they gave the keeper of the prison a strict order to keep the two safe, and in their bruised and bleeding state they were placed in the cell or dungeon kept for special criminals. The motive of the duovirs in this is not clear: perhaps they intended to send them to the governor as false claimants to Roman citizenship (a capital crime), or perhaps they already feared they would get into serious trouble for flogging them. The spirit of the apostles rose superior to their acute physical misery, and in the night they sang aloud some of the psalms used in Jewish and Christian worship. Such sounds would at any time have seemed strange to the other prisoners, but doubly so now. "The prisoners", says Luke, "listened to them". Luke must surely have got that fact from one of those very prisoners, and the man would hardly have mentioned it unless he had felt something awe-inspiring about those voices in the night.

Then came the earthquake. Although Philippi is very subject to earthquakes this seems to have been a true miracle, for it apparently struck only the prison, not the town, and it did not cause any great damage to the prison but only flung open the doors, and loosened all the staples by which the fetters were attached to the walls. The apostles and the other prisoners were able to meet together. Yet none of them attempted to escape. Luke leaves us to guess that it was the influence of Paul and Silas's example or command, whom they regarded as the cause of the miracle, that kept them in their places, and even (as it seems) induced them to compose themselves to sleep again. When the keeper, roused by the earthquake, arrived he found the doors open and all silent within. Concluding that the prison was empty and that the event was due to some sort of magic rather than an ordinary and general earthquake (which would have exonerated him from blame), he foresaw disgrace and probably punishment too,

and was going to stab himself when Paul's voice stopped him : "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here". Having seen for himself that these words were true the man experienced a change of soul, as overwhelming perhaps as Paul's own conversion. He threw himself at the feet of the two bloodstained prisoners, and said : "What must I do to be saved ?"

These words at first sight seem strange and improbable in the mouth of a man who had, as it seems, never heard of Christianity or even Judaism. But the last few minutes had been for him, under God's guidance, a time of intense thinking. He had at once realized that some superhuman power was at work, a malign and cruel power as he at first thought. But Paul's words and the apostle's kindness and anxious care for his welfare showed him that this power was the god, whoever he might be, whom Paul and Silas worshipped, and that this god was not only a god of living power, able to shake the earth for their sake, but was also a god of gentleness, kindness and love, a being infinitely superior to the poor fabled gods of Greece and Rome. A man who had just stood on the brink of death may well have been able to reason thus without the help of learning and intellectual power, and to rise above all those customary ideas and habits which had hitherto dominated his life. He was willing to take the apostles as his guides and instructors, whatever the world might say. Paul and Silas briefly told him what the religion of Christ was, and he accepted it. After washing and dressing their wounds he received baptism there in the prison, together with his household—his family and slaves, who had also listened to the instruction and believed in it. He then took the two into his house, which no doubt adjoined the prison, and the apostles and the converts sat down to a meal over which reigned a spirit of the utmost joy and happiness. Even among Paul's endless adventures, past and to come, there could not have been many stranger or more touching meals than this supper in the small hours in the prison at Philippi. The joy was of the purest kind possible for man, the joy of those who had found the pearl of great price. Dawn was coming and all those who sat there fully expected that it would bring suffering and trouble. The keeper of the prison knew that he was almost certainly sacrificing his worldly position and that of his family by becoming a Christian. The fear of that very sacrifice had an hour or two ago driven him to the thought of suicide but he was now willing to accept the same loss with gladness. As for Paul and Silas, they were still prisoners : the keeper had no power to release them. The danger in which they had already stood when they entered the prison would certainly be made many times greater when the duovirs discovered that they had made converts in the prison itself. But all

these fears were swallowed up in joy that so many new souls had learnt to know Christ.

Day came, and an order arrived that Paul and Silas were to be released. It was probably not the earthquake which had produced this change of mind in the duovirs. They and the town in general do not seem to have noticed the earthquake, and if they had it was not a rare event, and they would hardly have connected it with the two Jews. It is much more likely that cooler consideration had raised grave fears within them that they had indeed flogged Roman citizens, and they were anxious to get rid of the two prisoners as quietly as possible, without acknowledging their fault. Paul however was not content with this method and demanded that the magistrates themselves should come, and formally and publicly declare them free, thus making it clear to the citizens of Philippi that they were innocent of crime. It was undoubtedly for the sake of his little group of converts in the town, not to gratify his own feelings, that the apostle made this demand. And it was a moderate demand, far less than the prisoners were entitled to in Roman law. They could have taken their case to the governor and have asked for the punishment of the duovirs, but they waived this right. The duovirs came to the prison and "besought them" or "appealed to them"—in other words they admitted that an injustice had been done, and asked them not to carry the matter any further. Then they brought them out of the prison and requested them to leave the town. Paul and Silas were willing to do this, no doubt feeling that it would be better for their converts in the place that bitterness and excitement should die down as soon as possible. First they saw Lydia and the other converts (whom Luke now mentions for the first time) and urged them to be faithful to the gospel they had received, then they left the city, going westwards to the other cities of Macedonia.

Luke and Timothy had not been arrested. No doubt they met Paul and Silas before their departure and Timothy probably travelled with them, but Luke does not seem to have done so. Some years later when Paul revisited Philippi he met Luke there, and some think he had remained there till then, but on the whole this seems unlikely. The little band of Christians at Philippi not only remained faithful, but during the next few months, while Paul was at Thessalonica, twice sent gifts of money to help him in his work,[1] and the church there continued to grow and prosper. In his letter to them, written eight or ten years after this first visit, Paul repeatedly uses words of exceptional gratitude, affection and praise, and there is never any hint of fault or imperfection. He was writing from Rome, and we learn

[1] See Philipp. IV.15.

that the Philippian Christians had again sent him a gift, carried to Rome by one of themselves named Epaphroditus. Some other names are given, and we hear again special mention of the women there, a fact which makes us think of Lydia. Of her we know nothing more : she is not named in the Epistle.

We cannot read Luke's chapter on Philippi without feeling a strong desire to know the later history of the keeper of the prison. I think we can safely say that he remained a faithful Christian. When Luke wrote the chapter, at least ten years had passed since the keeper's conversion. Luke would certainly have known something about his later life, and I cannot believe he would have told the story at such length if the convert had fallen away from the faith. For he is the central figure among all the converts of Philippi. It was primarily for his conversion that the great miracle of the earthquake was wrought, though the miracle was also no doubt meant to signalize the importance of the whole of Paul's work there and of the first entry of the gospel into the continent on which its influence has been longest and deepest.

W. REES

St Mary's,
Cadogan Street, London