

## Maverick messiah

**Seventh Sunday of Easter** and the Baptism of Lola Kemlo, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2025

**Readings** [Acts 16.16–34](#); [John 17.20–26](#)

Sermons don't just write themselves, they need thorough preparation. Lola, who comes to be baptised today, deserves nothing less.

The preacher's challenge today: how do you really get inside the drama of today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the sheer adventure, as they spread the good news of Jesus across the Roman empire – something that must have seemed an impossible mission? Well, why not spend some time watching *Mission: Impossible – The Final Reckoning*?

I did – quite a long time: at 2 hours 50 minutes, the film takes rather longer to watch than the entire 28 chapters of Acts take to read. *Mission : Interminable* would be another title.

Critics are divided. 'Wildly silly, wildly entertaining,' says a five-star review. 'A miserable, apocalyptic tract,' says another. Marc Kermode (my go-to critic) [loved the film](#), but didn't enjoy all the 'sub-messianic hooey'. Sub-messianic? Yes, he says that the first hour is about establishing Tom Cruise's Ethan Hunt as the 'saviour of everything, everywhere, all at once.' 'He's basically Jesus,' says Kermode. And that got me thinking: why not compare and contrast: TC vs JC?

Tom is everywhere – he's in London, he's in Washington, then the High North, then South Africa; and he gets there by helicopter, aircraft carrier, submarine, plane, jeep. Jesus stays largely around the Sea of Galilee, though he does get as far as Jerusalem; and he walks, or takes a fishing boat; or, on one occasion, a donkey. Tom (who, famously, does his own stunts) has a taste for the spectacular, a temptation that Jesus explicitly rejects before his ministry begins. Tom moves fast and breaks things, while Jesus moves slowly and mends people.

Where is Jesus in today's story from Acts? We'll come back to that, because the front-and-centre character is Paul. Last week we saw him and his team arrive in the Roman colony of Philippi, in northern Greece. At the place where

Jewish people come to pray, they met a woman called Lydia. She heard their message, was converted and baptised.

Now Lydia is, as we heard, big in fashion textiles; she deals in purple cloth – very, very expensive stuff. She seems the kind of person who'd feel right at home in Marylebone High St with its stunning window displays and no visible price tags. Generously, she has welcomed Paul and company to stay as her guests in her no doubt very comfortable home.

Today, in that same place of prayer comes another encounter, this time at the opposite end of the social and economic spectrum – an enslaved girl, whose owners hire her out as a fortune-teller. Paul sets her free from that, and her minders engineer things he and his colleague Silas are beaten up, then banged up. So they go from linen sheets to leg irons in just nine verses. And then – in a rather *Mission: Impossible* moment – they are free.

What are we to make of this story? What might it have to say to a world like ours? It certainly portrays a world we recognise. We see extremes of wealth and poverty, sometimes close to this church. We see the manipulation of people without power, and the brutality of those who have too much of the stuff. To which we add the very modern problem which makes every other problem worse: a climate that is 'profoundly ill' (to quote the UK Met Office's summary of the World Meteorological Organization [report](#) last week).

Perhaps it's anxiety about all that this makes the world flock to films like the M:I franchise. It's escapism, sure, but – more than that – it lets us flirt with the idea of a certain kind of hero, the maverick messiah who breaks all the rules – and a fair few heads – to bring us solutions and even salvation. (Some, of course, do more than merely flirt with the idea.)

That is not how it is with God, however. 'The world does not know you,' says Jesus in our gospel reading as he prays to his heavenly Father. And he's right, we don't; but during this season of Easter we are invited to know God, and the one who shows us God. We are introduced to a different kind of messiah.

The killing of Jesus is the way the world tries to shut him up. The raising of Jesus is God's answer and God's victory. But it is a strange victory: no

reprisals, no revenge on those who tried to destroy Jesus. King Herod's crown stays on his head, and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate will stay in his job a while yet. God doesn't destroy them but bypasses them, rendering them increasingly irrelevant to his deep purposes as the good news of Jesus ripples out.

And where is Jesus in today's scene? He's not a character in the story, but he's there. In a way that surpasses Mr Cruise's carbon-heavy globe-trotting, he is everywhere. Before his death, he could only be where a three-mile-an-hour footsteps could take him. Risen from death, he is set free in the world: all time belongs to him and all places.

Today's story, typical of several in Acts, shows that: ordinary people, with the Spirit of Jesus in their hearts, dare and do great things, greater things than they could do in their own strength.

And their faith is infectious. Did you notice how the writer began the story by saying, 'As *we* were going to the place of prayer...'? By moving into the first person, the writer suggests that he was there, but he also invites us (his latest readers) to be infected too: *we* can hear this as *our* story; I too can dare and do great things, with God. How? Just 'believe on the Lord Jesus', as Paul says to his relieved jailer before he and his household are baptised.

Today Lola comes, nearly three years after big sister Nellie, as the latest in the Kemlo household to be baptised. And though she does not know it yet, it is into this great movement that she is to be welcomed, like those far-off figures in Acts, as the water of Christian meaning is poured upon her head.

Baptism does not give you diplomatic immunity in the world. Life does not always turn out like this story. Sometimes prison doors spring open, as they do for Paul and Silas, sometimes they don't. Paul himself knew that. Years later, he wrote to the church in this very city of Philippi, and we still have the letter, [in our Bible](#) (you can read it at home, in about the same time as it takes to watch the closing credits of *Mission: Impossible – The Final Reckoning*).

As he writes, Paul finds himself a prisoner once more, but this time the doors are staying firmly shut. Perhaps the Philippians recall his rollercoaster

visit to their city as he tells them not to worry about him now, because (he says)

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

*Philippians 4.11-13*

That is the secret God shares with us here, and the heart of Christian living which opens up for Lola today.