

Invitation and welcome

Acts 16:16-34
Revelation 22 12-end (part)
John 17:20-end

Sometimes as a preacher you read the Bible passages set for the day and a sermon leaps out at you. A sermon that you can't ignore; one that has to be preached.

Especially when one of the passages is one like the reading from Acts today – which is one of my favourite stories in the Bible. The story of Paul and Silas in Philippi.

The encounter with the slave-girl who was clearly being used and abused by her owners; the riot as the crowd attacked Paul and Silas; their arrest and imprisonment and beating. And the earthquake which caused the prison doors to burst open and the chains to fall off.

But the best bit of the story is the final part about the jailer (and eventually his family).

And so the obvious sermon to preach goes something like this ...

Imagine what it must have been like to be that jailer.

You have these two new prisoners in the jail. They have just (so it seems) incited a riot in the town. You are told to watch them closely – they are trouble makers.

As the evening goes on you begin to get a bit twitchy. They are singing. Yes, singing.

Here they are – they have been beaten, bruised and thrown into jail (and let's be honest, this jail is not a very pleasant place) and yet they are singing. As if it were the happiest day of their lives!.

And the other prisoners are just listening to it and some even joining in – like its some kind of impromptu karaoke. You get more and more twitchy. Just what are they up to?

The singing carries on for hours; with what seem to be some prayers thrown in as well. Eventually you reach the conclusion that its all pretty harmless. At least its keeping the other prisoners quiet for a change. All should be well tonight.

So you decide to leave them to it and go off and get some sleep.

The rest of the family are already asleep, and it doesn't take you long to join them.

But you are woken up with a start as the room begins to shake. You can't work out what is going on at first, then you realise it must be an earthquake. But you're not sure how bad it is. You look around. The family are all OK – just a bit surprised and all now awake.

But what about the prisoners. The authorities won't be at all happy if any have been killed (or worse than that – escaped). Especially these two trouble makers – the ones you were told to keep a special eye on.

You rush to the jail – but the doors are already open. Somehow the earthquake has thrown them open. Your heart sinks. The prisoners have surely all gone! They've surely all escaped! You know that for you this is an offence punishable by death. Your death. And you know that those in charge won't listen to any excuse – not even the fact there was an earthquake. So you decide to take matters into your own hands and kill yourself. Save the authorities the pleasure of doing it.

You draw your sword – but just then you hear one of the two trouble makers shout out “don't harm yourself – we are all here”

You can hardly believe what you are hearing, and you rush into the prison which had been almost destroyed by the earthquake. It's the mouthy one - Paul he's called - that's talking.

Your mind is racing

You get flashbacks to last night and what they were singing about and praying about.

They were singing about freedom; being saved. They were thanking their God that they had been freed from all that imprisoned them. Singing that while they were in chains, under lock and key in jail.

And yet here they are. They haven't gone. They have stayed here in the jail. They are still smiling; it seems they are about to break out in song again at any moment.

This freedom, this “being saved” they were talking about last night was clearly something totally new - and something worth finding out about.

You blurt out, almost without thinking – what must I do to be saved??

The trouble makers, Paul and Silas, then share the story of Jesus. How he had been the most amazing teacher and miracle worker; how the crowds had followed him, how the authorities had turned on him, how he had been arrested and crucified. They went on to talk of him coming back from the dead; of people seeing him, talking to him, touching him, eating with him. And how he had ascended into heaven. They then shared of how they had come to know all of this and how it had transformed their lives; how it meant that they had a new freedom – an assurance of forgiveness, a promise of God being with them always. How they too had met this Jesus. How they now knew they had his Spirit with them at all times.

The story is mind blowing but so engrossing. You listen and ask questions. They turn and say – you too can follow him; you too can have this freedom; you too can be saved. Why not be baptised now.

So you look up and you see that your family are all there – they have been listening too. You say – we will all be baptised now!

And the sermon would end with an encouragement for everyone to be like Paul and Silas, to be looking for opportunities to share their faith with those they came across.

But I'm not going to preach that sermon today. Not because its not an important sermon to preach – because it is. Not because people don't need to hear about the Christian faith today – because they do. But because for many of us such a message doesn't encourage us, but scares us. We don't feel – even with God's help – that we could possibly tell someone about what we believe in the way that Paul and Silas did. We'd find it virtually impossible to articulate our faith in that way. We might want to, but are not sure we could.

But it is important, vital in fact, that the faith is proclaimed. Each one of us must have heard it sometime in some way – otherwise we wouldn't be here today. Its what we are told to do by Jesus in any case and we can't just say that because it scares us we its not something we should get involved with.

So, with that in mind, the sermon I am going to preach picks up some words from the reading from Revelation.

Let everyone who is thirsty come, let everyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

That's a wonderful Invitation.

So I want for a moment to think about invitation.

Because its by invitation - that we tend to join new things and new groups.

Somebody, or some people, invites us. Come they say.

And when we respond to the invitation; when we go we are welcomed. Not in an over effusive, artificial way, but in a genuine and warm way. Honest and up front.

We go away affirmed and content; knowing that this is somewhere we could go again and somewhere we could get to call home. Somewhere we could belong to. Somewhere to which we could invite our own friends. Somewhere where we can be ourselves. Without putting on any masks. Just be ourselves and be comfortable being ourselves .

For people to hear about church and what the Christian faith is all about they need to be invited in some way. Someone has to say "come".

And that's an easy thing to do. A simple word. Each one of us can do it. We can invite a neighbour, a friend, a colleague, a family member.

Of course it may be that the person we invite decides not to come; that's their choice; that is not in our control. And if that's the case then that's not a problem. They will still be our friend, our colleague. Nothing has changed. It's them that have lost out, not us.

But it may be they accept. They come.

And it's then that the welcome they receive is all important. Not over effusive, but gentle, genuine and warm. A welcome that says you are valued, you are important, we are pleased that you are here.

Speaking about the Christian faith might for some of us appear to be a step too far. But we can all invite. We can all be welcoming.

And the Jubilee celebrations in the week ahead provide a great opportunity.

Come along and see the exhibition in the church.

Come to the street party. Enjoy some good food, some fun and games.

Come to the Songs of Praise. Rediscover the joy of singing. Be reminded about the Queen and her 70 years of service to the nation.

Each of us can invite. Each of us can do all we can to make people feel welcome. To take those first steps to finding out more about who we are and what the Christian faith is all about.

And who knows. If people respond to the invitation they may, like the jailer, be touched and moved by the words they hear sung, by the faith they hear spoken of and by the love they feel. They may, like the jailer, ask that question – how can I be part of this?

Each of us, then, is called to play a small part. Invite. Welcome. Share.

This week why not invite someone you know to come with you? Why not welcome those who do come that you don't yet know. And that might well give the opportunity for someone, in some small way, by what they say, what they do or who they are to share something of their story of faith.

But it will start with that word "Come".