**Acts 16:16-37 (also Rev 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-end and John 17: 20-end)**

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, ‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.’ The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They answered, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, ‘Let those men go.’ And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, ‘The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace.’ But Paul replied, ‘They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.’

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

The story we heard in the reading from Acts just now opens with the leaders of the early church taking over the roles that Jesus had fulfilled on earth: preaching, healing – but also echoing arrest and beating; attracting trouble, but defending those who cannot defend themselves.

As some of you know, I was heading off down to Cornwall for my post-Easter rest days a couple of weeks ago when I got a phone call: there are birds in church and the alarm is going off…. To cut a very long story short, we had an invasion of, I think, jackdaws. Two of them that particular day. And, with help, one was liberated, but the other went into hiding, and no amount of shouting and clapping and waving things in the general direction was going to disturb it into giving away its position. I bailed out at that point, and left responsibility with other kind souls so that we could start the long drive. The weird thing was that birds reappeared in church a number of times in that few days, but not before and not since.

We don’t actually know how they got in, but I am now paranoid about keeping the main doors shut, just in case. Cautionary tale for all of us now the warmer weather is coming, I think – please keep the inner doors closed unless people are coming through or the doors are being manned, (or womanned) as it were. We do have wire screens, which must be used in the event that those inner doors have to be open. Things that flap are my least favourite things, whether they be birds, or moths or anything inbetween.

Open doors. How many doors do we go through in the course of our daily life. Internal doors, house doors, car doors, school and office doors. Revolving doors and automatic doors. And we go through them without giving them a second thought. Oh, and church doors.

Doors are a bit of an underlying theme in the passage we heard from Acts this morning. In a world obsessed with locking things and people down – and indeed locking more people up – we need to think about what it means to live either with locked doors or with fully open doors. And what about our human tendency, once we have gone through the door open to us, to turn and shut it behind us. Consider who are we excluding in the interests of feeling safe ourselves.

As an immigrant, Paul finds himself taking risks but, in turn, also finding his voice. Here we see him encountering an unnamed slave woman, who spends her time speaking only the words that bring profit to her bosses; but then for perhaps the first time, she speaks her own mind, which ends up properly hacking Paul off. It is in irritation at her that he sets her free. But the net result is that he and Silas have hacked her owners off, are arrested and shut in; the wrong side of closed (and locked) doors.

We see just how grim the prison is – the innermost cell, airless and dark – and the men are not only locked in but also have their legs in stocks: not as we think of the stocks, but spread wide enough apart to be actually painful.

About midnight they are praying and singing hymns. Calling God to mind is the way they can stay sane. Though quite how their fellow-inmates stay sane when Paul and Silas are keeping them awake with singing, we don’t know! Then suddenly without any warning there is a great earthquake, that shakes the foundations of the prison, and not only do the doors fly open, but the prisoners’ chains fly off too. That is one strange earthquake – not trapping and crushing people under rubble, but setting them free.

The instinct surely, for any prisoner, would be to get out as quickly as possible. But what Paul and Silas demonstrate is not self-interest, but compassion for everyone else around them. The door might be physically open but in legal terms it is locked – they have not been released except by strange circumstances, so they stay put.

Now, according to Roman law, the jailer was personally responsible for the prisoners, so when he woke up and found the doors open, he feared the worst and was so scared of the consequences for him that he was ready to kill himself rather than face his masters.

Paul understood that the open door for him meant a closed door for the jailer, so in reality, the door remained closed to both of them. And that was a life-changing decision for the jailer in two ways, leading to him living and also becoming a believer. What we believe and how we act have to be in line, and Paul acted in a way that not only saved the jailer but brought him to a new life of faith.

As people of faith, we too are called to open doors for other people in a world that is much more used to doors closing. We cannot make full use of our freedom if we know our neighbour is oppressed or locked in. And while that is a broad statement about oppression in the world, it happens in all sorts of small ways in our daily lives:

I was talking to some guests at a baptism recently and I can’t actually remember the detail of that conversation, but the crux of it was that they found these church doors of ours intimidating. We can’t, for obvious avian reasons, keep them wide open, but we can invite people through, or even accompany people through and by our welcome open the doors wide.

Or taking a bigger view: as consumers we are conditioned to look for the cheapest prices, but we have to balance our wants with the fact that cheaper prices for consumers so often mean lower wages for the workers. We need where possible to keep doors open for them too and make it possible for them to live and flourish.

Paul was not willing for his freedom to come at the expense of another human being's life. Opening doors for someone else means recognising the beauty, sacredness, and worth of another human life as equal to the beauty, sacredness, and worth of our own life.

So, Paul stood for what he believed; he was thrown into prison, and perceived how his own liberation was inextricably entwined with the jailer’s. To the extent that, when the magistrates tried to release him unobtrusively to save themselves embarrassment, he could not walk away quietly. He refused to let them sweep under the carpet what they had done. He wanted a public apology that would make them accountable for their unjust actions and in demanding that, he could leave the prison with a good conscience. The doors that had been closed to him were now open, but by making that demand, Paul was imprisoning – capturing - those who had locked him in. The door-closers were obliged to become door-openers.

How many doors can we open this week? Not for ourselves but for other people? Jesus said: I have made your Name known to them and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them.

**Amen**