

Readings: Zech 4:1-6a, 10b-end Acts 12:1-11 Matt 16:13-19
Theme: Chains (St. Peter and Paul)
Aims: To explore the metaphor of 'chains' for our Christian lives today

Prayer:

Lord God, may your word be to us a light to our path;
speak to us this morning by your Holy Spirit,
so that we may be more effective witnesses to your love.
Amen.

Rome has about 900 churches.

The biggest two of these are:

 St. Peter's Basilica, at the Vatican, and
 the Basilica of St. Pauls Outside the Walls.

St. Peter and St. Paul

have been celebrated together as a feast day in the Roman Catholic Church from as early as the year 258 AD. At the end of their lives, Peter and Paul both ended up in Rome.

They were probably there together, until they were both martyred around the year 67.

The basilicas that bear their names were built over the traditional places of their deaths – St. Peter on Vatican hill and St. Paul 'outside the walls' of the original city.

And in those churches you can see relics relating to the two saints –

In St. Peter's Basilica it is possible now to see two fragments of bone which were declared in 1968 by the then Pope as being from St. Peter's body (although there is some doubt as to their absolute identity).

In St. Paul's, you can see nine links of **a chain**.

These chains are reputed to have held St. Paul when he was held captive in Rome towards the end of his life.

Our two New Testament readings this morning were both about Peter.

From Matthew's gospel, we heard Jesus giving Peter the 'keys of the kingdom of heaven'; Jesus told him he was to be the rock, the person on which God would build his church.

Roman Catholic tradition says that Peter became the first Pope when he lived in Rome at the end of his life. And from Acts chapter 12 we heard a story about a time when he had been arrested and put into prison for being an apostle.

The first half of the book of Acts, up to chapter 12, are about the ministry of Peter and the other first apostles. It was Peter who stood up at Pentecost and preached in chapter 2, explaining the gift of the Holy Spirit. It was Peter who, with John, ventured out in chapter 3 to heal people; and it was Peter and John who were first arrested in chapter 4, for 'teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is resurrection of the dead' (4:2).

Peter's ministry is prominent in the narrative all the way through until chapter 13, when a man called Saul (or Paul – he had both a Hebrew and a Greek name) comes to our attention.

Acts chapter 12 tells the story of Peter's miraculous release from prison, after a second arrest. It's told with lots of detail – Peter was bound with two **chains**, asleep between two soldiers while guards kept watch in front of the door.

Suddenly an angel appears to him,

and taps him on the shoulder to wake him up.

(this angel must have had a body to be able to do that! – perhaps it was a person?)

Peter wakes up; the angel says “get up quickly” –

and **the chains fall off his wrists**.

The angel tells Peter to get dressed

and then leads him out of the prison.

Peter follows him – and there is a comment here in v. 9 that he thought he was seeing a vision, not actually walking out of prison.

When the angel left him, Peter came to his senses and realised that it must have been an angel, sent by God, who had released him.

We can hear this story and be tempted, perhaps, to dismiss it.

Surely that cannot have happened!

It's one of those passages like others in ancient literature which record miraculous escapes or other interventions by the divine. They stress the protection given by God to the early Christian community; and in Acts chapter 16, a similar thing happens to Paul and Silas.

So what's the important theme, the message, of such a story? Why is it there?

I would suggest that its importance lies in what it is saying about God.

It is a story which describes the spiritual work of God.

Only He could have sent an angel

and opened the locked gates to set Peter free.

Only He could have made **the chains fall from his wrists**.

God has amazing power and this is an example of how they experienced it in the early church.

God is still God.

Our cultural context is different to that of the first century, as is our intellectual understanding.

But God, as we say, is the same yesterday, today and forever.

And, I suggest, is still able to set people free, still able to remove the chains from peoples' lives.

Let's take a moment to think:

- What are we chained to, that keep us captive and prevent us from living the life which God would have for us?
- How does God free us from those chains?
- And what are the implications for our lives?

I wonder what you might feel chains you, in your life?

Perhaps it's your job...
or something to do with your personality, that you have almost given up trying to change...
or perhaps it's expectations – those of other people, or what we expect of ourselves – that we can't keep up with?...
or is it a need to prove yourself, by accumulating the most up to date or best of everything?...
or the responsibility of providing for your loved ones, or caring for them....
There may be many things that could chain us –
that prevent us from knowing the freedom we would like.

In particular, we may feel chained to our sin – that old-fashioned word which means so much. Sin makes us break the relationship we have with God. We are sometimes wilfully disobedient, we ignore God and imagine we can do things on our own. This leads to us doing things we know are wrong, and that we know we shouldn't. All of us are tempted by sin, even (perhaps especially) the most outwardly Christian of us!

The good news, of course, is that God
can break the hold that the chains of sin can have on us.
He offers us forgiveness, when we say sorry.
We can start again. We have a clean slate.
If we are carrying the huge burden that sin can sometimes give us, God can set us free.

How does he set us free?
Well, I believe that God can work in whichever way he chooses;
but here are three suggestions –
firstly, through other people.
God has given us free will, the freedom to choose how to behave, what to believe;
and we can see God's work in the work of people around us who choose to help others;
who choose to live moral, upright, constructive lives as a member of a community.
God can use us when we are willing to be used by Him.

Secondly, I believe God can intervene directly into our lives.
This is the work of the Holy Spirit.
We can know the presence of God – for example, an overwhelming sense of His love for us, or the experience of healing, or a sudden understanding that we didn't have before...

And thirdly, God can free us
by the circumstances we find ourselves in.
Sometimes these are beyond our control, they just happen.
And they can change our lives.

Some people's experience of God setting them free from the chains of life happens in an instant. Many people have written about their experience, but one who comes to mind is Charles Wesley, the great Methodist hymn writer:

“Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
fast bound in sin and nature's night;
thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
my chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth and followed thee.”

This verse, from 'And can it be?' is a description of his conversion experience in 1738, and it's an experience that many Christians recognise.

But not all – for others, their experience of conversion is a gradual process that happens over time; or maybe they have never known a time in their life without knowing and loving God.

But for all of us, however it happens, there are implications.

The process of being freed by God from the chains of life takes a lifetime. It is a continual process of being made holy.

It's like a spiral of repeatedly coming to God, acknowledging our waywardness and saying sorry, accepting forgiveness, starting again...

And this becomes a way of life for us.

It is our part of the covenant between God and his people, and so it needs commitment.

It is something we *choose* to keep doing, because we know and love God and because we know what it's like to taste the freedom he offers.

In some of the places in the New Testament where Paul describes being in chains, he talks about being chained 'for the sake of the hope of Israel', or 'for which I am an ambassador in chains'.

To him, his chains were symbolic of his imprisonment – but they were also symbolic of his relationship with Christ. He was chained *because* of it. They brought him *closer* to God.

And so with us, our relationship with Christ is a commitment, made out of love, which keeps us chained to God.

The chains of life which prevent us from living as God would like are replaced by chains of love and promise which bind us to Him, through our faith in Jesus Christ.

In Rome today the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul

is celebrated by the Benedictine monks of St. Paul Outside the Walls processing with the **chains** that held St. Paul captive, taking them to the people and to other denominations.

But there is also St. Paul's fair, which attracts thousands of visitors.

As well as the serious, there is the celebration.

May we celebrate Saints Peter and Paul today by asking God to release us

from the chains of life and sin which hold us captive;

and to show us the freedom he can give us

to willingly take up the chains of commitment

to live a life of relationship with him.

Amen.