

# Jesus is already with you ...

*... and his grace is already enough!*

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*A sermon given on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, 1st June 2025 – by the Curate, the Revd Charlie Shefford, in Beverley Minster.*

*Acts 16.16-34*

If you've ever flown, you'll know the strange experience of waiting in an airport -it's a kind of liminal space, a place between places: you've left home, where you're not where you're going; you're no longer really here, but you're not there either; time seems to stretch and blur. And it's often in spaces like these, in the not quite here and the not quite there, that God chooses to show up - we find ourselves in an in-between space this Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost, between Christ going up to be with the Father in heaven and the Spirit not yet sent to us.

We find this in-between space in our reading from Acts this morning where Paul and Silas find themselves in a prison cell in Philippi, caught between judgement and deliverance; empire and kingdom; bondage and freedom. They had just delivered a slave girl from an evil spirit, and in doing so disrupted her owner's ability to profit from her. Furious, the wealthy couple have Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into the innermost prison cell with their feet locked in stocks.

But you wouldn't know this listening to them, praying and singing hymns to God, attracting the attention of the other prisoners - even in this dire situation they find freedom in God. Then into this odd calm, a sudden violent earthquake appears, shaking the foundation of the prison, opening all the cell doors and unfastening the prisoner's chains. This moment feels like a miracle, the joyful climax of the story - we expect Paul and Silas to throw off their chains and run free. But then they don't leave and instead of the story ending here, the story becomes about the anonymous jailer: the one who wasn't in chains; who had the keys; who held the sword; who was the one in control - or at least so it seemed. When he sees the cell doors wide open, he assumes the prisoners have escaped and draws his sword ready to take his own life, because he himself is a prisoner of sorts, too: Imprisoned by fear; fear of shame; fear of dishonour; fear of blame; of personal failure; of public humiliation. And then just before he takes his own life, Paul cries out, "*Do not harm yourself, for we are here.*" And in that moment, that thin space between suicide and salvation, the jailer asks, "*What must I do to be saved?*"

The theologian Tom Wright suggests a translation of this question that, while less accurate in a direct sense, gets to the heart of the question. He translates it as, 'Can you please tell me how to get out of this mess?' This is because the jailer likely wasn't thinking in terms of theology or eternity; he didn't know the vocabulary of sin and salvation; all he knew was that his world was falling apart and he needed help - and the answer he received was far more than he bargained for.

God doesn't dismiss our cries or ignore when we cry out for help. He doesn't ignore the mess we find ourselves in - He speaks into it: from personal pain to global injustice; from economic exploitation to spiritual despair - God sees the mess we're in, the brokenness of our world as it is now, contrasted with the world as it will be in the new creation when everyone is subject to

the reign of Jesus Christ. And God declares that because Jesus is now in heaven, is already reigning as Lord, that that new creation can break through into our current reality - right now, even in this prison cell, even in crisis.

So when Paul says, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved*" - he isn't changing the subject - he is expanding the horizon. The jailer asked how to get out of a mess. Paul answers with how to step into a new frame of mind, into a new kingdom. And that same night, the jailer takes Paul and Silas, both still prisoners, into his home. He washes their wounds, the same wounds he himself helped to inflict, and they baptise him and his entire household. The jailer, who was never chained, is now set free.

So in this story, we have Paul and Silas singing in chains, whilst the jailer was suicidal with keys in his hand. Most of us here, God willing, will never be imprisoned for our faith, but most here will know, like the jailer, what it is to feel trapped, trapped by fear, shame, the crushing weight of expectations that we carry from others: to succeed; to keep it together; to be enough; you look like you're in control; you have the keys; you're managing the household. But inside, you're exhausted, afraid, on the edge. Or maybe you're simply in the airport not where you were, not yet where you're going - a relationship has ended, but healing hasn't come; a job has ended and a new one yet yet to begin; you've made a prayer and haven't received an answer.

So for those of us who are in the mess and want to be saved, Paul tells us, "*Believe in Jesus Christ*." But what does this mean? It means trust, handing over and entrusting your life to Jesus Christ; it means praying when panic seems easier, forgiving when you'd rather protect yourself; giving when you're afraid you haven't got enough; asking for help when shame tells you to stay silent; it means singing at midnight; it means believing that even in the in-between, even before the answer comes, Jesus is already there with you, and his grace is already enough.

# Reading Text

## Acts 16:16-34

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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.' <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews <sup>21</sup> and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' <sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. <sup>24</sup> Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. <sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' <sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' <sup>31</sup> They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' <sup>32</sup> They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup> At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. <sup>34</sup> 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.