

Yate Methodist Church

Moorland Road, Yate, BS37 4BZ

10:30am Sunday 1 June 2025



Lectionary:

Acts 16:16-34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21

John 17:20-26

Sermon

Our lectionary always amazes me in terms of how it brings together seemingly disparate readings to present a message that is relevant to the time it is addressing – even though it has been set for years ahead.

We have a story in Acts of Paul and Silas ending up in jail for helping a slave who had approached them as ‘servants of the Most High God’. Yet God frees them and provides the opportunity for them to transform the life of the jailer.

Our gospel reading, from John, illustrates Jesus’ love for his followers (which include us) and he prays to his Father that we may live in God’s love and God’s love live and be shown in us.

And the Revelation reminds us that Jesus is coming again.

Some of us may remember growing up in a Christian home with lots of rules and regulations – you must go to Sunday school on a Sunday (when I was growing up in the manse, it was Sunday School on Sunday morning and then Crusaders Christian Bible group in the afternoon, and as I hit my teens, church youth fellowship in the evening). You certainly didn’t go shopping on a Sunday, and generally it wasn’t a day to go out for sports or to visit friends/have friends around.

Such things may well have put people off Christianity – neither my brother nor my sister want anything to do with the church.

Looking back on this through a more ‘modern’ lens, I wonder whether such restrictions inhibit our ability to share God’s love with others – preventing us meeting others where they are, physically or emotionally.

I once preached at a church which lamented the reduction in numbers attending their services since a local car boot sale had opened up on a

Sunday morning. They asked how they might attract people back to church and were somewhat flummoxed when I suggested they, at least once a month, take a table at the car boot sale and provide tea/coffee, cakes and a chat as a new way to engage people where they are. Sadly they didn't give it a try.

But Jesus' prayer in the gospel reading is for us to demonstrate his love and unity, so that others can be drawn to faith. Jesus set aside legalistic rules to show kindness and compassion for the marginalised. Remember the time in the gospel where Jesus was rebuked by the Jewish authorities for allowing his disciples to pluck grains and wheat in a field and eat them as a snack. In the authority's legalistic view this was 'work' and forbidden on the Sabbath. But Jesus responded that the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. It was the day God rested after the work of creation, and so is a time for re-creation.

Instead of being captive to the rules, we can focus on becoming who Jesus wants us to be. We are freed to show Jesus to others and reflect the love of God.

Hopefully not many of us will have experienced being physically imprisoned or held against our will, but we can imagine how distressing this might be.

When I worked in the Youth Offending Team, one of my roles was that of Appropriate Adult. This meant when one of our young people was arrested and Police needed to question them, it was my job to attend the custody centre to support the young person and ensure that they were being treated correctly. On one occasion I arrived and the custody sergeant brought the young man out so I could have a quick chat and also confirm that we would be wanting a duty solicitor. The young man was then told it would be up to an hour and he would have to wait back in his cell. Having been there a while he was not too happy about this and asked whether I might be allowed to sit in the cell with him so he had someone to talk to. Strictly speaking this was completely against the rules, but the sergeant knew me well and replied that he would allow this 'as long as Mr Wilson is willing to do it'. Wanting to support the young man, I agreed to do this and so we ended up locked in police cell together. Even though I knew I only had to shout to be let out, after less than half an hour I was becoming extremely uncomfortable with the experience.

On other occasions I have visited young people in secure settings – secure children's homes (like Vinney Green), Secure Training Centres (like Milton Keynes) or Youth Offenders Institutions (as Ashfield was, and Portland and Parc still are). On every occasion the brutality of these settings (despite staff

efforts to be supportive of the young people) left me wondering how our already damaged young people survive such settings. They always leave an impression on me.

In our Acts reading we see examples of people who are held against their will – the slave-girl being exploited as a fortune-teller and Paul and Silas imprisoned by the authorities. Even the jailer is effectively in a state of captivity bound, by his fears of what might happen were his prisoners to escape.

Today there are so many people, both in our own community and across the world, who are in some form of captivity. Where this is modern slavery through people trafficking – maybe working in the sex trade, or in car washes or nail bars – or literally in our local prisons, Ashfield which specialises in sex offenders, Eastwood Park for girls and women, or Horfield for adult males. Bear in mind not all those in prison have been convicted, some are being held on remand pending decisions as to their guilt or otherwise.

There may be others in our society trapped in inappropriate relationships, imprisoned in their own bodies through ill health, age or disability. Those who are economically trapped by low income employment, or reliant on benefits because they are unable to work. What about those whose lives are limited by the restrictions placed on asylum seekers, maybe fleeing horrendous situations, war and oppression in their 'home' countries. Did you notice the echo of the Leviticus law in our last hymn that those dwelling as strangers in a foreign land are still precious in the eyes of God and should be treated as such.

Maybe some of us have experienced being helped to free ourselves of inhibitions that might have hindered our faith in God and the Church.

Maybe we have been liberated through the agency of counsellors, spiritual directors, a wise pastor or a listening friend. Someone who is now a minister speaks of a time when a pastor encouraged him to plant some flowers on a Sunday. This clashed with ideas from his strict upbringing but enabled him to see that rejoicing in creation isn't a sin!

How do we use our experience and our freedom to help release others from the things that hold them back and show them the love of God? This is a mission to be embraced, as Paul and Silas did.

Today's Gospel reading also points us towards the motivation for that mission. God wants us to show his love to those we meet so that they can be free to become the people he wants them to be.

How can we fulfil that mission today?

Some people may already be actively involved in supporting those involved in modern slavery or in prison, or in supporting agencies that do this. Some of us may be trained to help those suffering from psychological or mental health limitations. At the very least, we can all become better listeners to those in need around us, and we can all support these works with prayer.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus assures us that we are loved and free.

Our challenge is to use our freedom to engage with God's mission of setting others free too.

We do this when we let God's love shine through us, so that his glory is revealed to those around.

Remember always, that Jesus is coming back, in the meantime we are his representatives here – what sort of image are we portraying.

Amen. Come Lord Jesus, come.