

## 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter Te Rātapu Tuawhitu o te Aranga

Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> May 2022

White/Red

**OT:** Acts 16:16-34; **Epistle:** Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; **Gospel:** John 17:20-26

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### **Old Testament: Acts 16:16-34 NRSV Paul and Silas in Prison**

<sup>16</sup>One day as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a female slave 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 the 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 marketplace before the authorities. <sup>20</sup>When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men, these Jews, are disturbing our city <sup>21</sup>and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being 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 in 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.

**Epistle: Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21 NRSV**

<sup>12</sup>“See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work.

<sup>13</sup>I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.”

<sup>14</sup>Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates.

<sup>16</sup>“It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

<sup>17</sup> The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.”  
And let everyone who hears say, “Come.”  
And let everyone who is thirsty come.  
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

<sup>20</sup>The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

<sup>21</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

**Gospel: John 17:20-26 NRSV**

<sup>20</sup>“I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup>that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup>The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, <sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. <sup>24</sup>Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

<sup>25</sup>“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup>I 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 and I in them.”

[pause]

*Holy God,  
through signs of grace you reveal your glory to all the world.  
Open our eyes to see the hidden and surprising wonders that you perform,  
that we may believe with our minds  
and trust in our hearts  
that you alone are the God of all creation.  
Through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray.  
**Amen.***

Last week Andrea and I met with a group of fellow clergy – where, surprisingly the topic of conversation was around how we were all doing as people, and as churches as we slowly emerge from COVID-19.

In the group were leaders from traditional churches (like ours) as well as more contemporary and Pentecostal varieties.

There was clergy from small church's, and clergy from churches two, three and four times our size.

Some of the churches represented followed fairly structured, liturgical approaches to worship, whereas others more fluid and flexible approaches.

Some had organs, some had pianos, some had full out music teams, and some had none,

Truth be told, it was a fairly mixed group – comprising of as broad a representation of the Christian Church as you could get.

And as we talked, and shared and chatted – it quickly became apparent that despite our varying differences, we all had one thing in common – a realisation that our congregations are all aging, and that the numbers of newcomers is dwindling.

In fact, as we sat together and talked, almost all of us came to the conclusion that within the next 5-10 years many of the churches represented in the room would no longer be viable, and many would have shut up shop altogether.

[pause]

Today's readings all share very similar ideas – they all speak about the life and witness of the Church. Thursday just past was the Day of Ascension - the day when we remember the resurrected Jesus returning to heaven.

And in leaving Jesus gave those first disciples their marching orders – to go into all the world, preaching the good news and making disciples, baptising them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

But in reality, sending out the disciples was not all that Jesus was doing. He was telling them to go and to be transformative people, to be people who represented the love of God, to be a visible presence of good in the community, to be welcoming and accepting and kind.

In our Epistle reading today, Paul and Silas encountered a woman who was possessed by a demonic presence. This woman would follow Paul and Silas around the town tormenting them, and this made Paul angry. He didn't become angry at the woman, but at the spirit that was tormenting her. So he ordered the spirit to come out and the woman was released from her anguish.

In love Paul set her free. In love Paul welcomed her. In love Paul was a transformative presence in her life.

[pause]

Our gospel reading today has a similar theme. John 17. This passage is part of Jesus final words to his disciples as they sat around the table in that Upper Room on the night before his death.

In John's version of the last supper, Jesus first washes his disciples feet – an intimate and loving act, then he shares with them from his heart, and tells them that he will be betrayed and that he will die.

But he also tells them of the coming of the Holy Spirit – the foretelling of Pentecost, and then he reminds them (in John 15) of the importance of being grafted into the vine, and then he prays for his disciples, and today's gospel reading is part of that prayer.

Listen again as I read it...

<sup>20</sup>"I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup>that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup>The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, <sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. <sup>24</sup>Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

<sup>25</sup>"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup>I 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 and I in them."

This prayer, prayed by our Lord and Saviour over two thousand years ago, was a prayer prayed for us.

<sup>20</sup>"I ask not *only on behalf of these* **but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word**, <sup>21</sup>that they may all be one.

Jesus is praying for us.

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup>The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, <sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Jesus was praying that we would be a transformative, loving and welcoming community of faith – a visible outworking of the transformative, loving and welcoming God who sent Jesus into the world.

<sup>24</sup>Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

<sup>25</sup>“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup>I 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 and I in them.”

[pause]

As that group of clergy gathered and reflected and prayed. We all came to the same conclusion. It doesn't matter what style of worship we have, or what approach to ministry, or what flavour of church, or what size we are, or what instruments we play...what matters is whether or not we are truly representative of the God who loves us.

For if we are, then others will see that and will be attracted to that.

If we are welcoming, then they will stay.

If we are spirit filled and spirit inspired, then they will be changed as we are changed.

But if we are not.

Then in 5-10 years, we will be gone. Close. Done. Over.

[pause]

I wonder, will we survive as a church?

Because it won't be the music that will make the difference.

It won't be the style of worship.

It won't be based on whether we have pews or soft seats.

It won't be based on any of that.

It will simply be based on this – are we loving, are we welcoming, and do we exude the transformative, sacrificial, giving spirit of God.

Let us pray.