

## Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> June – St James

### Acts 16:16-34 and John 17:20-26

Why are you here this morning?

Because its Sunday  
Because I always come to church  
Because someone brought me today  
Because of marriage banns being read  
Because I want to pray  
Because I'm on a rota  
Because I sing in the choir  
Because I'm the vicar  
Or perhaps you're not sure

For many / perhaps most/ of us its because we believe in God and in Jesus Christ his Son- a faith we will attempt to put into words as we recite the creed in a few moments

and because we want to meet with other believers and worship God, pray to him, listen to him and be encouraged by him.  
For many of us it's a key point in the week – a time of renewal and equipping.

But we could ask another question.

Why do we believe?

And maybe then things get a bit more complex.

For some – and I think of the story of the jailer that we heard in the first bible reading – its possible to point to one event and to one person. For him it was down to that earthquake, and the words Paul said.

Remember the story. Paul and Silas had been involved in a riot and had been beaten and thrown into prison. The jailer had been charged with keeping them securely, and had locked them in stocks in an inside cell.

Then during the night as Paul and Silas were singing hymns (and – note this – the other prisoners were listening to them – presumably to what they were saying about the gospel and Jesus death and resurrection, as well as their singing) there was an earthquake and we are told that the chains of every prisoner became undone.

The jailer was woken up by the earthquake and feared the worst. He was convinced that human nature would prevail and that Paul and the other prisoners would have escaped now that their chains were off and the prison doors were opened.

He was about to kill himself – for he knew he would be killed once the authorities found out that the prisoners had escaped. But they hadn't. Not just Paul and Silas, but also the other prisoners. None of them.

We are all here, said Paul. And the jailer was amazed by the fact they didn't walk out the door and he wanted to know more.

Presumably he had heard something about them, maybe even had heard them praying and singing hymns through the night. He knew there was something different about them and he wanted to find out what.

Or perhaps he was so shocked at what had happened to his prison that his question *what shall I do to be saved* might better be paraphrased as *what can I do to get out of this mess*.

And then he listened to Paul and Silas talking about their faith, and the Lord Jesus. So impressed was he that he called his whole family – and remember this was the middle of the night, just after a powerful earthquake, probably when they had other things on their minds – his whole family – children, slaves, servants, his wife.. and they were all baptized.

(We have some baptisms later this morning - I hope there is no earthquake but that today is as memorable for other reasons for those being baptized here)

SO this jailer could no doubt trace his faith back to that one moment – and perhaps his children and family could too.

Perhaps we know people who can trace their belief back to one person / one event. I've known people come to faith through funerals, baptisms, large missions, courses like the Alpha course etc etc (though I don't know anyone who has come to faith through an earthquake)

But for many, maybe for most, its very different.

Its a combination of people and events over a length of time.

For me I could say (and it would be true) that I came to faith at a large meeting while I was at University. But that wouldn't tell the whole story.

Maybe it was partly down to the fact I was sent to Sunday school when I was a child

Maybe something my parents passed on to me – though faith was never something overly important for them

Maybe it's the silent faith in the background of Auntie Nellie who later told me she prayed everyday for members of the family to become Christians

Perhaps it was through a teacher at school talking about his faith

Or down to the welcome I received at university by friends who were

Christians. Or I could trace things back to the fact that one particular friend asked me to go to a meeting with a well known speaker who put the Christian message in a clear and compelling way

Its none of those things on their own, but all and more besides

Perhaps you might say you were brought up in a Christian home, and the faith kind of grew inside you. From parents, god parents, friends, church members, etc etc. Hard to pin it down any more than that. You can't imagine life without your faith. Its just part of you, and always has been.

Or maybe belief/faith is something you have drifted into. Through church attendance, listening to the readings and sermons, singing the hymns and saying the prayers., being with other believers.

But if you think about it, even those people who came to faith in one moment – maybe like the jailer – that was only their first step on the journey.

We can imagine him joining the small group of new believers in Philippi; talking to them; learning from them; hearing the word of God. Reflecting on how his new-found faith helped him make sense of life.

Pondering his actions, his attitudes in the light of his beliefs.

Slowly becoming a different person as his faith permeated his life.

SO the sudden 'conversion' was perhaps not quite as sudden as it seemed.

And for his family – his children and the others – that night, that baptism was only the beginning. They too, we would hope and speculate, became part of the local community of believers and grew in their understanding and commitment.

To them faith and wisdom and knowledge was handed down. From the jailer himself as he grew in understanding; from other Christians, from evangelists and preachers like Paul. Helping them grow in their own faith.

And in our reading from John's gospel we pick up the same theme.

In these chapters Jesus is praying a prayer for his closest disciples – the 12 who gave up all to follow him, and were with him and alongside him for 3 years. Their faith and belief had started from nothing, and had grown and developed as they spent time with Jesus and learned from what he did and what he said. Soon after this they were to become the leaders of the church. They would of course continue even then in their learning and understanding and journey of faith.

Our reading from the gospel begins with Jesus saying 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word'

He is praying for unity amongst believers, but not just the closest ones he sees around him, but also down the generations through the ages down to you and me.

Jesus expected the disciples to tell others about what they had seen and heard. So much so that Jesus saw those 'others' – generations to come – in the same light as he saw those closest to him. He prayed for us as he prayed for them.

And herein is this vital truth.

Faith only takes seed and grows in people when others pass it on to them.

Paul and Silas to the jailer

My teacher at school, my great Auntie Nellie, the speaker at that meeting. Vicars and preachers through the years, authors of books I have read, other Christians I have spent time with. People whose lives as well as their words have become inspirational.

And it can happen in surprising ways. Up to a couple of years ago Kate and I led weekly discussion groups for youngsters – teenagers between say 14 and 19. We would get to a Thursday evening, tired out as the week approached its close, and think – O no, we've got to go to the youth 'cell' group as we called it. Can't we just open that bottle of wine and do a crossword.

But almost always two hours later we would come back home, still open the bottle of wine, but now talk excitedly about what WE had learned from them. Their enthusiasm and commitment, their struggles as they seek to live out their faith in the hostile world of schools and colleges in the constant spotlight of social media

And it works the other way too. As I spend time with other Christians; as you spend time with other Christians, the things we say, the things we do, the way we live helps their faith grow and develop. We become their teachers, as they are ours.

This is what the journey of faith is all about

For those being baptized here later today - Their parents and godparents and sponsors will make promises, but its not just them that will promise to help them grow in their faith. Its all of us. The whole church. And we will try to do that as we seek to keep in touch with those families in the months and years ahead. Through pastoral contact, through things like Messy Church and anniversary services.

There's old African proverb that *it takes a village to raise a child*

its true in terms of faith and belief too. As we help and encourage each other on our journeys of faith. And not just those of us who are "in church" on a

Sunday morning, but also those we come into contact with through the various church activities. MU, Café, social events, special services, baptisms, weddings, funerals, residential homes, schools, Messy Church, and so on.

Over the past few years the Archbishops have urged churches to set aside the time between Ascension and Pentecost as a special time of prayer under the label of Thy Kingdom Come.

In this Parish we have taken up the challenge offered by the Archbishops. Each one of you should have had last week a yellow leaflet which talks about what we are doing (there are some at the back today – please make sure you have one).

The leaflet has suggestions for topics of prayer for each day, and a prayer for each day that you can pray. These topics are not vague, but specific to Shirley and the word of the church here. Today, we are praying for our mission amongst young families – thinking of baptism contacts (there are two baptisms today) and things we do like Messy Church. Tomorrow as the schools in our Parish return after half term we will be praying for them

To help us and prompt us in these prayers, there are some display boards at the back of St James and these will be up for the whole time.

In addition there are a couple of special times of prayer. On Tuesday we will walking and praying around the Cranmore estate, meeting outside Widney School at 7:30pm. If praying on the streets frightens you, then just come for the walk and pray silently, or let others do the praying.

And on Saturday morning (when we regularly pray for growth in our churches) there will be several of us meeting for prayer at St Johns at 8:30am for half an hour.

Or simply pray on your own, in your own home as you spend time with God.

However and whenever we pray, we can pray that through our conversations and activities and contacts something of the love of God can be shared to enable more and more people to take steps forward on their journey of faith. Can I encourage you to join us.