

**SUNDAY 01 JUNE 2025    Ascension Sunday    Rev Wayne Toleafoa**

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

## **THE FREEDOM OF GOD**

### **John 17:20-26**

As I read our gospel lesson for today, my mind went back to the many farewells I have attended over the years. The farewells were usually for a young relative, who is going away – usually to somewhere far away, to study at university, to work overseas, or to play rugby in another country.

I'm not a young bloke anymore, but I had a farewell when I came down to Havelock North to be your minister six years ago.

On those special occasions, the whole family gathers together over a huge shared meal and BBQ. There's an air of expectation and celebration in the air. A mixture of happiness and sadness, especially for the young person's parents. Friends are there to wish them well on their new journey.

The 'traveller' will be given all kinds of advice from parents and friends in both formal and informal speeches, and they are usually called upon to respond.

In Samoan or Polynesian families, they usually call in a pastor like myself, to say prayers of blessing for the person about to depart. In the prayer, I (or the pastor) will try (with the help of the Holy Spirit) to capture the thoughts, and the hopes and dreams that are present, in the gathered throng.

**In our gospel reading today, we read part of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples. He knew that his death was drawing near. He was about to be betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.**

**His Farewell Discourse is used (again) in today's readings, because today is Ascension Sunday.**

On Ascension Day Jesus is said to have ascended into a cloud, the last of his physical appearances to his disciples.

**In his Farewell prayer Jesus expressed his deepest hopes and dreams for his disciples.**

**He prayed his disciples may be one. That they may know God just as Jesus knew God, and that his followers would live in God and God in them, in the same relationship that Jesus had with God.**

**The Church came to believe that after the Ascension, Jesus became a spiritual presence, freed from his physical body.**

In his new freedom, Jesus is able to be everywhere present in the form of the Holy Spirit, which has been described as Christ's 'Other Self'. (The Trinity being three expressions or the 'other selves' of the One God).

Next week will be Pentecost Sunday when we will celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to the early church. Pentecost Sunday is often regarded as the birthday of the Christian Church.

**A theme which I could see running through our readings today is the theme of Freedom – God favours and creates freedom. God wants people to be free.**

### **Acts 16:16-34**

**In our story from Acts, nearly all the characters/ all the people involved in the narrative are slaves in a system of domination and oppression.**

In the story Paul and Silas come across a young girl who is a slave. A slave with a special gift of being able to tell fortunes.

Her owners are able to make a lot of money out of this girl by selling her gift to other people. The girl is just a commodity in the marketplace and an economy dominated by distant Rome.

In the story, the nameless girl made a nuisance of herself by following Paul and Silas and calling out: 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.'

Interesting that the slave girl considered Paul and Silas to be 'slaves' like herself, even though slaves of the Most High God...slaves to a higher power.

A kind of power-encounter takes place, with Paul confronting and driving out the 'spirit of divination' from the slave girl, in the name of Jesus Christ.

The girl is freed from the spirit that has possessed and driven her.

But it also renders the slave girl worthless to her masters - because she can no longer make money by telling fortunes.

Under the same system of domination and oppression, Paul and Silas are arrested and taken before a judge who orders them to be flogged and imprisoned for upsetting the local economy which is built on slavery and oppression. Even the magistrate is part of the system of oppression.

**Paul and Silas are flogged and imprisoned. But even in their imprisonment and in their chains, they feel free enough to sing hymns and say their prayers out loud. They possess a freedom that the oppressive system cannot suppress or take away.**

In the jail, an earthquake happens – opening the doors of the prison cells. The chief jailer, thinking that all the prisoners had escaped, prepared to take his own life.

He was also a prisoner of the system. The oppressive system which demanded that he pay with his life if the prisoners escaped.

When the jailer discovered that all the prisoners were accounted for – he couldn't believe it and turned to Paul and Silas who had literally saved his life.

The jailer's world was turned upside down by two men who were not part of the oppressive system. Men driven by love and not the all too familiar fear the jailer and other oppressed people know.

The jailer became a convert to the Way of the Most High God. He was converted to the freedom of the children of God.

**God had created freedom for everyone in the story - except for those who perpetuated the system of oppression. i.e. the girl's owners and the Roman system that kept their subjects oppressed.**

In the background of the story of Paul and Silas in prison, is Jesus' manifesto where Jesus stated his purpose in a quote from Isaiah 61.

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord."*

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

**Our reading from Revelation this week, will be the last of our readings from this puzzling Book.**

It is again about the End Time, which is nothing to be afraid of. John the Divine paints a very welcoming picture of the end of time, when Jesus /God will come to bless and reward the faithful.

**I have said in a previous reflection, that the Book of Revelation may have been describing events which were already happening during the time of John (the writer of Revelation), i.e. during the reign of Nero AD 54-68, or during the great persecution under Domitian AD 81-96.**

The symbolism used is often confusing, but the symbolism could also be applied to contemporary figures of John the Divine, like the seven Roman Emperors. The Beast could easily describe Nero.

**If the apocalyptic events described in Revelation have already taken place, then we have no need to be concerned about the future.**

My father was not a Biblical scholar, but he was a very wise man when he said that the Last Days for all of us, will be the day we die.

**The focus of our faith must be today, and tomorrow and not on some far-off Apocalypse.**

Too often Christians have used the Book of Revelation to justify their own insecurity and exercise control over others. They weaponize the Book of Revelation to create fear, rather than freedom, or dare I say it, 'love'.

I don't think anyone ever feared Jesus during his earthly life. After his resurrection, Jesus came to his disciples as a loving presence. That is how Jesus comes to us today.

**The real question is 'How are we pleasing God today?'**

**In any event, the words of John in Revelation were comforting words to the believers, as they are today.**

*12 '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.'*

*16 '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.'*

**We always welcome Jesus into our lives, and we believe that through his Spirit, He is with us at every moment of our lives. We welcome the freedom that His Spirit brings.**

## **PRAYER**

Liberating God

Free us from all that would oppress us

And all that oppresses others.

Grant us always your Spirit that sets us free

Turn our world upside down

So that systems of oppression and injustice

May be seen for what they are.

On this Ascension Sunday

Enable us to rise with you

To the place where we can be our better selves.  
In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Who sets all people free. Amen.