

Sunday 29th May 2022

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.
God is ever present, around us and within us,
we worship together in God.

Suggested hymn Praise and Thanksgiving

Listen [here](#)

Prayer

Praise to you, God of creation, let all the earth sing your praises.
From the heights to the depths, from the smallest to the mightiest creation joins in your song.
From the beating of a butterfly's wings to the soaring song of the lark,
from the chatter of a dolphin to the mighty roar of a lion,
from the quiet whisper of grass in the wind to clatter of rain on a roof, creation joins in your song.
You are always with us, your love surrounds us in the beauty of creation,
your presence enfolds us through the caress of creation, your creation encourages us in our journey
of discovery as we explore you in all the wonders of the world.
As we join in worship we bring our hearts and minds and voices to praise you.
As we lift our eyes to your glory may we feel you lifting us in our worship.
As we rest together in your love may our love radiate into the world.
Our Father....

Reading Jeremiah 29:1-8 ([Living Bible](#))

Acts 16:16-34

Suggested Hymn All my hope on God is founded

Listen [here](#)

Reflection

Life is full of decisions and inevitably full of 'what ifs' We can all think of an occasion when we have wondered what if I had not missed the bus or decided to visit that place on that day. Often, we are prompted because we recognise that an opportunity has arisen because of our decision, an opportunity often completely unrelated to that decision.

Our story from Acts raises a number of 'what ifs', what if the girl had not followed Paul and Silas, what if Paul had not lost his patience, what if the girl's owners had not taken their loss out on Paul and Silas, what if the authorities had realised that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, what if Paul and Silas had not trusted in God when in prison, what if they had taken the opportunity to escape. The slave girl was persistent in following Paul and Silas and in calling out what she could 'see' and others could not, the faith of Paul and Silas in Jesus and God. You might think that would have been a good thing but put yourself in Paul's shoes, he is trying to go about his business, visiting places of prayer and talking to people and day after day this girl is following and shouting out. It must have been distracting for Paul and for those with whom he was trying to engage, and, in the end, frustration leads to action.

We all know what that means, we act without thinking, we lash out, or in Paul's case he 'heals' the girl by calling out the Spirit within her. This we imagine is a good thing for the girl but remember she is a slave and her 'gift' has ensured her continued care by her owners, who have profited from her gift. Now she no longer has the gift they are going to be disadvantaged, and the girl's future is no longer secure. Swift, unthinking action has consequences for everyone. The consequences for Paul and Silas are to be brought before the authorities, as the girl's owners take out their frustration. The

accusation is of disturbing the city and advocating practices unlawful for Romans, no mention of healing the slave girl. How often are we tempted to come up with half truths and excuses to get our own way when things go against us or things happen that we don't like?

The magistrate takes the side of the residents, who are probably influential townspeople, after all they have at least one slave. Paul and Silas are beaten and flogged and then put in maximum security prison, shackled by chains. However, pause for a moment and reflect on the picture painted, a group of 'foreign' missionaries arrive and start to try and change the way things are done, suggest that the local customs are 'heathen'. It is an uncomfortable truth that this sort of action is a large part of the colonialisation of India and inculturation of Africa. Done at the time with the best of intentions but now recognised as the wrong approach. Some missionaries were treated as Paul and Silas were treated but not all and much harm was done. Now, we recognise the importance of culture, the importance of recognising different approaches and their values and learning from one another. Nowadays it is not uncommon for ministers from Africa to come to Britain as missionaries and sometimes theology mirrors that negative approach but happily not always. There are many lessons to learn.

In Luton, as in many multicultural towns and cities, we have adopted a better approach, living and learning together, respecting our different paths to God and enjoying the rich diversity of culture all around. Grassroots has been at the heart of this learning and for that we are very grateful. We pray that in the 21st Century no one is thrown in prison for being different!

Our story does not end in the prison. We are reminded of the depth of faith of Paul and Silas through their response to the situation. We are told they sang hymns and prayed. Now in similar circumstances most of us would pray but I wonder how many would be able to lift their voices and sing a hymn of praise. It is midnight and the prison would have been dark, the singing brings a welcome relief to the other prisoners. Then suddenly, the ground begins to shake, the walls begin to tremble as an earthquake hits the region. It is strong enough to shake the doors from their hinges and break the shackles from the floor. Suddenly, freedom beckons. We are told the jailer, in the darkness imagines the worst, the prisoners are free, and he goes to kill himself, a better option than the punishment for letting the prisoners go, but then a voice calls out – don't worry we are all here!

Paul was in prison for acting in haste, for not recognising the consequences of his action. Perhaps he takes a moment now, every instinct must have been to run and escape but he doesn't, and we are led to believe none of the prisoners do. The story had condensed things into a single sentence but there must have been a gap, time for the jailer to realise what the result of the earthquake was, time for Paul to persuade the other prisoners to stay. It is a miracle in the jailer's eyes, and he responds, and his family also respond. We are left with the question what if Paul and Silas had not been put in prison? Sometimes not doing the obvious brings more opportunities than we might imagine.

When the people were exiled to Babylon they yearned for the familiar, there was a temptation to create an ex-pats community separated from the new and strange culture and customs around them. But they received a message – integrate be a part of where you are and build new lives. Multiply! Don't dwindle away! ⁷ And work for the peace and prosperity of Babylon. Pray for her, for if Babylon has peace, so will you.

What do people expect the church to do and be? How might we surprise them?

We like the familiar but that does not mean it is the best approach to engaging others. Sadly, much of what we do has not changed in forty or fifty years whilst all around us culture and life has moved on and changed. Thirty or forty years ago our children decided what the church offered was no longer relevant to their lifestyle and simply accepted it, that the way of things and so now we are faced with not so much a gap as a chasm as we struggle with the effect of missing generations. Tradition is not static is something which is passed on and changed by each generation, given an update if you like, but with missing generations the tradition we have has not changed in forty years.

We live in a world that understands creation differently, understands humanity differently and so also understands God differently. How do we respond and offer an appropriate way to invite others to see their connection to God and one another? The answer is by not doing the obvious. By thinking outside the box and taking a different approach not simply for others but for ourselves, to keep our faith growing and expanding. Covid has shaken us all up, challenged us to re-evaluate the important things in life and as churches struggle to keep 'the traditional' going it has given us an opportunity to explore doing things differently. As churches, wouldn't it be good to look back in five, ten maybe even fifteen years and reflect, what if Covid had not happened! The journey of God's people is always forward.

Hymn In exile defeated, to Babylon hurled
In exile, defeated,
to Babylon hurled,
they barely subsisted,
cut off from their world,
their mem'ries of Zion,
both blessing and curse,
sustained and yet trapped them,
made Babylon worse.

To them Jeremiah,
sent word, in God's name,
to leave off their dreaming,
start living again.
"Build houses, get settled,
plant gardens and eat;
engage with this new world
to end your defeat."

Tune St Denio Listen [here](#)
"Be bold Babylonians,
who build, work and sing,
prove exiles' lives matter
by all that you bring;
yet pray for this city,
its peace, its *shalom*,
for Babylon's peace
and your own peace are one."

This challenging message
allows no way back,
no matter the danger,
disaster or lack;
with God press on forward,
engage where you are,
by grace live new beauty,
in God's strength go far.

John Campbell, 30/7/20

Prayers

What if Abraham hadn't served the strangers?
What if Moses had ignored the burning bush?
What if the Mary hadn't heard the angel?
What if Jesus had declined death on the cross?

SILENCE

We confess that often we forget to give you time.
We ignore you standing outside the door
as we barge through on yet another important mission.
We forget the wonder of your power
as we try to cover every eventuality,
removing the need for your miracles.
Help us to be still.

What if Christ is here, homeless, without food?
What if Christ is here, living in our town?
What if Christ is standing outside our closed Church doors?
What if Christ is the child who won't sit down?

SILENCE

We confess that often we forget to look for you.
So busy preparing for worship
that we fail to sit and listen at your feet.
Our preparations for Christ's coming masking our anticipation of his arrival.

Help us to be still.
In a world of pace and panic,
teach us to be still,
to savour your presence,
be nourished by your word,
to wonder at your might,
to listen for your will.

Heather Whyte 1998

We pray for our world

Loving God we share with you our concerns for the world, a world in which creation sings but the song is muffled by the sound of war and the cries of the hungry and fearful. We pray for peace and justice, the peace that comes from tolerance and love and the justice that comes with compassion and care for each other. We have a part to play in answering this prayer, for our actions influence others, so may we think before we act, challenge ourselves to be more loving and more generous in our living, and challenge governments to be more caring and to seek justice and equal opportunities for all people.

We pray for our country

As we watch the news and read the papers we cannot hide from the reality of need within our own country. We are facing a cost-of-living crisis following a pandemic and for millions this means desperations and money runs out and hard choices must be made. We find it difficult to trust the government, unsure if they recognise the need in our communities. We pray for justice and compassion in government. We pray for the organisations who seek to help those in desperate need, and we pray for creative thinking in how to tackle our problems

We pray for our town

We live in a diverse culture, rich in traditions and ever challenged to explore new connections. Recognising the need within our communities we pray for the inspiration to be an answer for our neighbours. Recognising our own strengths may we reach out to share what we have with others, making the best use of the resources we have to help those in need may we be creative in how we use our buildings and work together to make your love a tangible presence in the lives of those around us.

We pray for ourselves

Loving God you hold us, and you know us, our hopes and dreams our concerns and fears are within you. May we recognise your presence with us and experience the challenge of your love as we journey through life. Strengthen us when we feel fragile, encourage us when we are unsure, embolden us when we dream of a better way that in your Spirit we may be the change that the world needs individually and together, as we follow the way of Jesus. Amen

Our offering to God.

As we worship together, we pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church through our continued offering and by exploring new ways of living generously and sharing the message of hope that is God's love. Amen

Suggested hymn We are pilgrims on a journey Tune Servant Song Listen [here](#)

We are people on a journey,
through the world of love and fear,
drawing strength from knowing Jesus
and his message 'God is near'.

God unites us on our journey,
leading us on paths unknown,
showing wonders unimagined,
by our side, not on a throne.

One with us and with all people,
God embodies, Christ is light;
by his openness and sharing
giving wisdom and new sight.

So we gather to encourage
one another on the way.
Through our living and our loving
showing Jesus every day.

Children on the way of Jesus,
pilgrims guided by a star,
called to love and share our treasures
with all people, near and far.

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Blessing

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.