

Joining in the Story

It was quite dark inside the replica Bronze Age round house as we sat on low wooden benches around the ashes of the central fire and waited for the story to begin. Then in he came, the Celtic storyteller, and drew us into the world of the story with skill and passion, humour and mystery. We sat enrapt, my 5 year old granddaughter and I. She was not the youngest there, nor I the oldest... this story was for everyone, however precisely we could understand it, we were drawn in and held by the words, our imaginations set free and our hearts warmed. He told us all about the *selkies*, mythical creatures who are half seal and half human, who swim around the western isles... and at the end, he said,

'So if you should see a *selkie*, resting on a rock, give her a wave from the shore and she might just wave back to you...'

Stories draw us in and open up to us possibilities of how life could be different, different from what we have known and experienced, from what we may expect, or fear.

In the Bible, Luke is a great story teller. His gospel contains most of Jesus' very best stories, as well as the greater story of Jesus himself.

And in the past few weeks since Easter we've been reading Luke's second volume, the continuation of the story of Jesus in the Acts of the Apostles.

Because now they, those motley disciples who had first been the audience, the listeners, now they are part of the story themselves, and in fact they are the ones telling the story....

Our readings from Acts have given us insight into how the gospel spread – the great story of Jesus and of God saving us taken out from Jerusalem by Peter and others, and then, since he heard the story and became part of it himself on the Damascus road, by Paul and his companions, journeying by land and sea as the Holy Spirit led them.

The places they visited became the first churches, planted around the Mediterranean, with names which we now associate with the letters Paul wrote to those churches in the years following his visits.

And because we can hear these stories today, and hear them afresh by the Spirit's power as we allow God to speak to our minds, hearts and imaginations, we too can **join in the story** today.

Paul and Silas are in Philippi, and are staying with Lydia, whom we met last week. She heard the great story, believed in Jesus and joined in. And invited Paul and Silas to come and stay with her- they think that her house became the base for Christians to gather for worship and sharing bread together, as the church there came to birth. Paul and Silas not only told her the story, they lived it for her and with her so that she could do the same, she could join in.

And we hear in thesees verses how Paul and Silas lived while they were in Philippi, not just what Paul said or wrote.

There is a good reason for this, in the opening verse.

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer....

This is Luke now telling his own story, which has become part of Paul's story and part of Jesus' story...

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer....

So when we are part of the story, **we pray with other Christians.**

We may be fortunate enough to do that with others in our home, or here in church (8.15 every day Monday to Friday if you can join us), or you may pray alone but joined with others through saying Morning Prayer – these days you can get in not just in a book but on your phone or tablet!

Every time we say The Lord's Prayer, whether together or alone, we are joining in prayer with all God's people.

And during these days of *Thy Kingdom Come*, we can pray with Christians around the world, helped and guided by the prayer journals and other materials.

We pray daily with other Christians. In my ministry both in London and in Durham, I have found this to be the hardest, yet the simplest and most transformational thing to do.

I remember in London a young Russian orthodox priest who was helping in a neighbouring parish to mine while it was in vacancy, and I was asked to offer some support. After thinking wise thoughts about clergy development and training, I realised finally that what God was really asking me to do was to **pray with him**. So once a week I'd cycle up the road and Andrei and I would say Morning Prayer together, sometimes with the faithful elderly Reader in that parish who began to join in too.

Simple, and transformational, as we began to see each other, the church and the

parish differently, to imagine how things could be and what God's story might look like for St John's.

Then God called a very gifted and experienced priest to minister there for 7 years with his wife, ploughing, pruning and sowing, and now a younger priest with a family has come, who is reaping a harvest for the kingdom and extending the church's work into a neighbouring and needy council estate. And that exciting story began with prayer. But you'd be surprised how many Tuesday mornings I really didn't want to go and pray!

Yet for us too, as for Paul, Silas and Luke, with Lydia and the rest in Philippi, right here today, **we begin in prayer together.**

Secondly, we see how Paul **never misses an opportunity**, however it arises. Luke's account of the slave girl incident is that of the bystander with a mobile phone, capturing the scene for a u tube clip or an interview with the police or papers. Paul was, he says, 'very much annoyed'- toned down a bit I think, in this final written version. I wonder why Paul is so cross?

It must have been irritating to be followed and name- called in the street, of course. But I believe his anger really stems from two things- that the girl is enslaved, both physically and spiritually, and that the name and work of God is being slandered and held back.

Paul gets cross- but with good reason! His concern is for the girl and that God should be glorified, not for his own safety. He knows that he won't be popular for disrupting their business, but he is answerable to his Lord and knows too that God's power is greater than any other, so he tells the evil spirit to leave her, the girl is set free, and God is glorified.

It's likely that the local Christians supported her once her owners decided she was of no more use to them, it's likely she became a believer and joined in the story. We hope so.

And we learn from this that Paul will **never miss an opportunity** to be the means for God' power to set people free, to draw them into the story of salvation. That's a challenge for us to consider too...

What follows is a central and painful part of the story: Paul and Silas now **walk the way of the cross.**

They are arrested, put on trial, stripped, beaten, imprisoned, put in stocks and in the darkest innermost cell in the town jail... left to rot. No one expected to see them again- as we look back to Good Friday, does that sound familiar?!

But even through all this they are worshipping and praising God at midnight... and we hope the local Christians were too- certainly Lydia will have been aware when Paul and Silas don't come home for tea that night! It is very clear that, even when they are suffering, Paul and Silas have confidence in God and his power and that they know that through suffering and even death, comes victory and life, in the power of the Spirit and in union with the risen Christ.

We may never have to face beatings and imprisonment for our faith, though many, many Christians today across the world *do*. But we will all walk the way of the cross as part of the story of following Jesus- for you it may be in caring faithfully for an elderly or frail family member, or remaining faithful through unexpected loss or tragedy, or giving tiem or resources to be with those who face poverty and

injustice... The way of the cross is ALWAYS part of Jesus's story, and part of ours too. Lets not avoid or ignore it, but join in and watch for God's glory to be revealed.

An **earthquake**, the prison doors fly open and the prisoners' chains are released!!

We'd expect those prison inmates to run away, as the jailer certainly did. He was ready to kill himself rather than face the consequences of having allowed all his prisoners to escape!

But this is Jesus' story, and Paul is telling it.

Utterly calm and authoritative, Paul is led by the Holy Spirit to stay in prison, to persuade everyone else to do so too, no less, and to see God do even more... As we saw before, Paul is putting the needs of others and the glory of God before any need or desire for his own safety.

The jailer is completely amazed by their behaviour- he falls down trembling at their feet , than takes them out of the prison and asks how he can be saved. And what has brought him to this point? Well, it's a combination of God's awesome power in sending the earthquake to exactly the right spot at the right time, and what he has seen and heard in Paul and Silas - praising God while they are beaten and bound, and not escaping. The jailer hears the story, told in the direst of circumstances, and believes.

In a wonderful juxtaposition, Luke tells us that the jailer washed their wounds and Paul is the means by which he and his household are washed inwardly as they are baptised, they become Christians. They are now all part of the same story, serving one another and then sitting down to eat, as followers of Jesus together.

By the way, Paul and Silas are also officially released, receive an apology for their bad treatment, go back to Lydia and the see the believers there, and then finally move on from Philippi.

But some years later Paul wrote them a letter, the epistle to the Philippians, in which he urges them:

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. Phil 4: 9

They have seen him living the story, praying daily, taking every opportunity to share the good news with no care for his personal safety, but only for God to be glorified in his life.

And they have seen him with Silas walking the way of the cross, but through it seeing God's mighty power and glory, and people being saved...

And us today?

Will we follow Paul's example, will we too be part of the story of Jesus?

For it is as we pray daily, look for opportunities, and walk the way of the cross that we will see God's power and glory.

And as we pray, *Thy Kingdom Come*, this week with Christians around the world, it will be so.

Amen.