



ST NINIAN'S UNITING CHURCH
WEDNESDAY WORDS
28 May 2025
Scripture Acts 16:16-34



Prayer

The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad;

Let us rejoice in the lord.

Clouds and thick darkness surround our Lord;

righteousness and justice are the foundation of God's throne.

God's light is illuminating the world,

removing all shadows and darkness;

the earth sees and trembles.

The heavens proclaim his righteousness,

and all peoples see his glory.

Amen

(Paraphrase of Psalm 97)

Thanks & praise prayer points

- For the creation that is all around us; for autumn colours on trees, and winter flowers in bloom.
- For the animals and birds of the world; for the joy of singing birds.
- For all police and emergency service workers, who keep our community safe and respond to calls for help.
- For volunteers who give generously of their time to help make the work a better place.
- For our church congregation, our leaders, and those who generously give their time and talents to support our worship and mission.

Forgiveness prayer points

- For rushing when God calls for us to be still; for talking when God whispers for us to be silent.
- For hurting others by our words or deeds, whether intended or unintended.
- For not caring for your creation as you called us to do.
- For not sharing your good news with friends and neighbours.
- For experiencing moments of bigotry or distrust of others who are different.

Words of Grace

Light shines on the righteous and joy on the upright in heart. Hear God's word of grace, you sins are forgiven. Amen

Reading: Acts 16:11-34

From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹² From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵ When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

¹⁶ Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." ¹⁸ She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

¹⁹ When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. ²⁰ They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar ²¹ by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

²² The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. ²³ After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ²⁴ When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. ²⁷ The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹ They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. ³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

Reflection

The reading starts with Paul meeting Lydia while he was looking for a place of prayer. Lydia is an independent businesswoman (a trader in purple cloth and head of her own household). Lydia becomes a believer, and Paul and Silas stay with her for a period.

Once again on his way to the place of prayer, Paul meets another woman. This woman is a slave – both to a group of human masters and to the evil spirit that possesses her. She is a woman of no power, status, or freedom. Yet she speaks the truth about Paul and his partners, following them all around town and providing free advertising for Paul’s ministry.

But it seems that even the truth, when proclaimed through abusive systems, ends up being distorted. The Greek text is apparently ambiguous – does this woman declare that Paul and Silas offered “*a* way of salvation”, rather than “*the* way of salvation”.

And Paul responds to this attempt by evil to distort the truth, setting the woman free from the evil spirit that controlled her life. (This woman, sadly, then exits from the story. While freed from the spirit, she remains a slave to her human owners. The text is a good reminder to carefully read scripture having regard to wider cultural norms of the time it was written; at this point in history slavery was common-place and accepted. And as such, Paul’s focus on freeing the woman from the spirit, but not her human bondage, makes greater sense).

We might expect the people who witnessed this exorcism to react with awe and wonder. But instead, there is only greed, bigotry and darkness. Paul and Silas are labelled ‘outsiders’ and ‘different’, justifying violence and arrest. We often see the same in our society, with targeting of groups when they are different, such as migrants, religious minorities, or persons of different sexual orientation or gender identify. Too often, those who are perceived a ‘different’ can become the object of suspicion, criticism, or even violence.

Is there a risk that we too, as a Christian community, fail to recognise God in our midst? Especially when that working of God upsets our plans or expectations.

In this instance it seems as though bigotry has won, and Paul and Silas are locked in chains. But the first sign that God’s hand remains carefully at work is reflected in Paul and Silas respond. They sing praises to God — not laments for the suffering they are experiencing (which would be understandable, appropriate, and biblical) — but praise for the privilege of being God’s servants in the face of injustice.

In Acts there are two previous reports of God releasing Christian followers from a prison (Acts 5 and Acts 6). Here God works a miracle with an earthquake. This is a very strange

earthquake, which sets Paul, Silas and the other prisoners free, rather than trapping and crushing them.

At this point we might expect Paul and Silas to leave the prison and go straight to Lydia's house. But this is an escape story without an escape. Paul and Silas don't leave. In this instance, being God's servant does not mean escaping from a dangerous place but rather remaining to witness to God's word. Having apparently shared God's word through song with the other prisoners, now Paul and Silas remain to save their jailer from suicide and share the Good News of Christ.

Just as Lydia's life was changed by the gospel, so too was the jailer. The jailer asks for a light to physically check on the prisoners and experiences a spiritual light. When the jailer realises none of the prisoners have escaped, presumably at the encouragement of Paul and Silas, the jailer washes the wounds of Paul and Silas, becomes their host (rather than their guard), and asks how he can be saved. Verses 31-34 provide a lovely summation of Christian life: witness; service; and hospitality.

This reading from Acts reminds us of the need to avoid judgment and bigotry towards others. We don't know when an angel will come upon us in disguise. It reminds us of the fundamentals of Christian life: witness, service and hospitality. And it reminds us how God continues to shake the foundations of the world, bringing light and transformation.

Amen

Intercessory Prayers

Lord God, we pray for your creation this world. Help us to care for the world you have created, and all that inhabit the earth.
Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for the leaders of our country, and rulers of the world. May they rule with humility, justice and wisdom, for the benefit of all.
Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for the leaders of our church, and the leaders of other churches in Australia and around the world. We give thanks for those involved in ecumenical engagement and pray that your Church be united in proclaiming your Holy name.
Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for all missionaries of your gospel, in Australia and around the world, sharing your Good News to those who have not heard it. Bless their ministry as they share your light in the world.
Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for all those working for social justice in the world. Strengthen their work, and empower them to speak truth to power. Help us to call out bigotry and oppression.
Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for those known to us who are sick, in distress or lost a loved one. Be with them, comfort them, and show them your love.
Lord hear our prayer.

Hear the prayers we bring to you Lord God.
Amen.

Song: The Porters Gate – Illuminate the Shadows



Illuminate the shadows
Comfort those who are cast down.
Illuminate the shadows.
Be our refuge in the time of storm
O God our help in the time of trouble.
O God our help in the time of trouble.
Illuminate the shadows.
Cast the evil ruler from His throne
Illuminate the shadows.
Break oppression with your mighty arm
O God our help in the time of trouble.
O God our help in the time of trouble.
Illuminate the shadows.
Til every idol has been trampled on
Illuminate the shadows.
Til every statue comes tumbling down
O God our help in the time of trouble.
O God our help in the time of trouble.
You bring hope to the hopeless.