

Loosening the Chains

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at FBC on June 1st, 2025 – Acts 16:16-34 & John 17: 20-26)

When I worked with young offenders, I met a very young man who was jailed for manslaughter. As he was very young at the time, the magistrate thought very carefully about how much time he would be imprisoned for, as he thought this young man had a chance of being rehabilitated. Whilst in prison he had much counselling and grew up into a gentle young man. The day he was released from prison, I drove him to the family on the other side of the city, where he would live initially. As we drove, we talked. I asked him what his plans were. The first thing he was going to do was to change his name; he wanted nothing to do with the past. Then he was going to try and become a fireman. He had met some firefighters who inspired him and during his time in prison he had grown up and had increased in both height and strength. In prison, he had come to the conclusion, that he needed to make a positive contribution to society. Once the bars of the prison, or in the words of our bible reading today, once his chains had been loosened, he was going to do all he could to be reconciled to society, to show society that he was sorry for his past actions and wanted to be reconciled.

This week we are marking two connected things. The first is National Reconciliation Week which began on Sorry Day which was May 26th and ends on June 3rd which is Mabo Day. Sorry Day was when the report of the Stolen Generation was given to the government and Mabo Day was when Eddie Mabo challenged the government's idea that Australia was 'Terra Nullius' which meant the land was not owned or occupied by anyone when Captain Cook arrived. Of course the land had been occupied by First Peoples for thousands of years. This meant first peoples could claim their land back and we hoped was the beginning of reconciliation in this country.

The other event we mark this week is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity – we Christians, of all denominations, commit to understanding and celebrating our differences rather than using them to divide.

Both these events are about reconciliation, which is the subject of Jesus' prayer in our first reading. Let's hear his words again - ²⁰ *"I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

Jesus' prayer is for unity and reconciliation between us, so that the world might catch a glimpse of God.

In the children's talk today I talked about Mandela and my dad and the big and small steps they each took toward reconciliation between peoples in the lands in which they lived.

In my first story today, I shared about a young offender I worked with, who upon release from jail had decided he wanted to do whatever he could for the community who had given him a second chance. Once the chains or incarceration had been loosened, he wanted to show society he was sorry for what he had done by assisting them.

This week both first peoples and others are walking together from Portland in South-West Victoria to Melbourne and as they do that they are learning from each other, they

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are going past sites where first peoples were massacred, and acknowledging what happened, in order, that they may be reconciled and work together to both understand each other and do what they can to make life better for first peoples. The walk will end on Tuesday (Mabo Day) at Whitten Oval, just down the road from here.

As I have thought about reconciliation and Jesus' prayer this week, I wondered what the story of Paul and Silas' imprisonment might say to us about this.

Paul and Silas are being bothered by a slave girl who made money for her owners by fortune telling. In the end they ridded her of spirit, but that meant her owners could no longer make money. In their anger they had Paul and Silas brought before the courts and had them beaten and imprisoned, basically because they are preaching the gospel. In prison they would pray and sing hymns. One night the prison experienced an earthquake, doors opened, and chains were loosened. The jailer assumed all the prisoners had escaped, and he thought he would be in great trouble, so was preparing to take his own life. Paul called out and told him they were still there, and asked him not to harm himself. The jailer soon after became a believer, and he and his household, like Lydia last week, were baptised and then offered hospitality to Paul and the others.

Now if you have been imprisoned unfairly and there was a chance to escape, I wonder what you would do. Would you run? Would you leave the jailer to his own devices? Paul and Silas didn't run away, and they did even more than that, they did all they could to save the jailer. That is an act of reconciliation, like Mandela wanting to forgive those who jailed him and be reconciled with them.

As I think about all the stories we have looked at today it seems to me that the unity Jesus prays for, that reconciliation he seeks becomes possible when we loosen the chains of another.

When we loosen the chains of fear, of prejudice, of greed, of individualism, of ignorance, of pride in both ourselves and each other, then we will put others before ourselves and in so doing walk towards unity and reconciliation.

Jesus invites us to take that walk, will you join him?

Amen.