

**Open Doors**

*Acts 16:16-34; John 17:20-26*

“If there is one virtue on which we can all join hands, it is freedom: freedom of speech, freedom of religion. Freedom is the blessed treasure of (the academic world) – freedom to think, teach and publish. Freedom is also a blessed treasure of the pulpit – freedom to speak as one feels led by God to speak.”<sup>i</sup> We have the freedom to vote. We have the freedom of the press, and freedom to gather anywhere we choose in our community.

Yet look around. Freedom? Surrounded by our burglar alarms and medicine cabinets. Our mobile phones and iPads are never far from our hands. A study last year in the United States said that the average American looks at their iPhone 52 times a day. The Millennial generation (those born between 1981 and 1996) check their phones up to 100 times a day. And before we start tutting, I sat a week or so with a row of very aged former Moderators during the General Assembly, and just out of badness, took my phone out and waited to see how long it would take for those generations, all older than me, to take out their phones ‘just to check’. Within two minutes every one of them had, apart from the one who panicked because they’d left their phone in a pocket somewhere else, and the one who was soundly asleep.

A freedom of choice to do just about anything we want, whenever we want. We have built a society which has been given, apparently, an unprecedented measure of freedom to its citizens, so long as I do not bump into you while you are getting yours. What we call culture is a vast super market of desire where citizens are treated as little more than self-interested consumers. I have freedom of choice but now what do I do with my freedom? We are free but also terribly lonely, terribly driven. The nine-to-five, or is it more likely to be eight-to eight, or longer jobs, monthly mortgage payments, over-programmed children, dog-eat-dog interviews, this has become our freedom.

I wonder if we really know what true freedom is any more. I caught the tail end of a television programme some days ago where a family of two parents and two children lived, in the space of

a month, from the 1950s to the 1990s. Forty years in four weeks. What they found was that though there were restrictions imposed by society, freedom of what they could buy, and what they could do with their time, they even went to Church, as they years rolled on the increase of gadgets, so-called time-saving devices, meant they spent less and less time with each other and interacting as a family. When there was less to do, there was more time to do it together. When technology came in, there was less time to engage socially.

The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, "Man is born free, and everywhere is in chains."

Faith comes not to chain us but to liberate us. Faith comes not to lock us in prisons of restricted intellect and limited imagination, but to open doors of possibility and opportunity that encourages us to engage with the people around us, and the world around us. And God said it is good. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."<sup>ii</sup>

Jesus began His ministry quoting the Old Testament proclaiming freedom to captives. In our reading from Acts, the ministry of Paul and Silas brings freedom to captives, healing to sick people, and hope to those who live in fear. The two followers of Jesus had been accused of disrupting local religious, social, economic life and local tradition and had been imprisoned. They sang hymns all night. Metrical psalms, John Bell, Graham Kendrick or Kenneth Leighton we do not know?

There was an earthquake, foundations shook, chains were unfastened, doors opened. Maybe God didn't like the music either. But the doors were opened, and the good news of Jesus, through Paul and Silas, was freed to go into the world. To the jailer and his family, and then on and out into the world.

Open doors.

Iron bars do not a prison make. There are prisons all around us. Prisons of class and status. Prisons of education and education being denied. Prisons of health and infirmity. Prisons of abuse, sexual, physical, drugs and alcohol. Prisons of poverty and prejudice. Prisons of guilt and shame. Prisons of laziness and indecision.

Yet God is a God of open doors. On this Ascension Sunday we remember the parable of Jesus leaving earth behind and returning to heaven, through the open doors of God's love which now will never close. In John's gospel we read that through God's open door the love that the Father has for His Son is to be shared with the world.

Last week's General Assembly opened some doors. Radically. It is not simply a change of national and regional church, it is what happens here at local level. The doors have been opened.

Open doors are of little point if we do not have the courage to move towards them and go through them. Open doors enable us to go from one place to another. Open doors take us into the future, which will not be the same as the past. Open doors allow us to engage with new possibilities.

Might it be the case that God is calling us to let some things go, so that we can go through God's open doors, and try something new and different? God has opened the door to the future, and we are invited by God to go through.

We will move forward best if we have a positive attitude, and a grateful heart. When we engage with the good news of Jesus, we disengage from confining assumptions about what we can and cannot do, and about what were past priorities. Today we move on, and we move up through God's open door. God stretches out a hand, to help us through.

What shackles you in your life and holds you back? Is it work that is no longer exciting or engaging? Is it an attitude that you know to be harmful and negative but you have become used to that overly critical way of viewing the world, despite the damage it is doing to you and the relationships around you? Is it a clinging to a past that is passed, and crumbling in your hands, but you're too afraid to let go? Is it a disappointment in life that you have let define you, despite every encouragement to move on? Is it a belief that you're not good enough, clever enough, brave enough, important enough, loved enough, and that somehow you will never amount to much and that you don't matter?

Child of God, whoever you are, Jesus comes to you in bread and wine. Jesus says, “I am the door”. Jesus says, “Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in...”

Open doors. Our future, our hope, our possibility, our destiny, our challenge, our promise lies just beyond the threshold.

We are at one of those threshold moments in the history of our Church, nationally, and here in Morningside. God is blessing change, and calling us to walk with God through the open door to where God waits. You might not feel ready. You might not feel capable. You might not even want to move on, but God is saying to you, right at this very moment, “Come on, come with Me.” Not only “Follow Me”, but also “I will be with you always.”

Don't be left behind. Reach out to the God Who is reaching out to you.

Minnie Louise Haskins wrote a poem quoted by George VI. It talks about gates, but it can easily be understood to be about open doors.

*And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:*

*“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”*

*And he replied:*

*“Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.*

*That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”*

*So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.*

*And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.*

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit  
Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> William Willimon, Acts – Interpretation Series, p136ff

<sup>ii</sup> II Corinthians 3:17