

Imagine standing before that great tree in the image you see today—its roots deep in the earth, its branches reaching to the sky, birds flying freely from its limbs. Around it, people of all kinds stand hand in hand, connected not by sameness, but by shared belonging. This is a picture of freedom and unity—not as the world defines it, but as the Divine offers it.

Today's readings lead us into two very different moments: one is loud and dramatic, the other quiet and prayerful. But both are deeply connected. They show us what it means to be free—not just from chains, but from fear, injustice, and separation—and what it means to be united—not just in belief, but in love, action, and purpose.

Let's begin with Acts.

Paul and Silas are in prison. Not for wrongdoing, but for setting someone free—the enslaved girl who was being used for profit. Their act of healing challenged a system that benefitted from oppression, and the result was chains.

But what happens? As they sing and pray, there's an earthquake. The prison doors fly open. Yet, what's remarkable isn't just the physical freedom that follows—it's the spiritual freedom that takes root.

They don't run. They stay. The jailer, expecting death, is instead met with compassion. His life is transformed. He and his household find faith and are baptised.

Here, we see the freedom that Christ brings: the power to resist injustice, the courage to act with grace, and the hope that no situation is beyond transformation.

This echoes Isaiah 61:1– “to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.” Paul and Silas embody this. And so can we.

But how do we do this today?

We do it when we challenge unjust systems—whether that’s poverty, racism, or exclusion—we imitate this holy resistance.

When we choose peace over retaliation, like Paul and Silas did, we show the deeper freedom of faith.

When we welcome others, even when it’s costly, like the jailer opening his home, we participate in the liberation of God.

In our second reading from John’s gospel, we hear a prayer. It’s the voice of Jesus, speaking not just for the disciples, but for us. Jesus prays, “I ask... that they may all be one.”

Not uniformity. Not agreement on every point. But unity in love, in purpose, in truth.

The unity described here is not a human construct—it mirrors the unity of God who is Trinity. “As you, O God, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us.” This is about deep connection. Not surface-level harmony, but a woven-together life.

This unity is not abstract. It’s visible. It’s meant to show the world something of God’s glory. And it’s grounded in love: “so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them.”

So how do we live this unity, how do we live this love?

We do it through Churches Together. When churches work together across denominations, traditions, and cultures, we give witness to this unity. How many churches are there? The answer is one. There is God's church, of which our humble gathering is called to participate in.

We do it when we disagree, but refuse to demonise one another, we show a different way—rooted in forgiveness and grace.

We do it when we include those who've been excluded—whether due to disability, background, identity, or doubt—we declare: "You belong. You are one with us."

Romans 12:5 says, “We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”

Unity is not an optional extra. It is who we are.

So, picture again the image: the roots spreading deep—our shared story of liberation.

The birds flying free—our inner transformation and freedom.

The people joined in peace—our visible unity in love.

Freedom and unity are not separate. They grow from the same tree. True freedom liberates not just individuals, but whole communities. True unity requires us to be free—free from prejudice, fear, and control.

As Paul writes in Galatians 5:1, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”

And in Colossians 3:14, “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

So I offer a challenge, an invitation...

What would it look like for us to be that tree?

To spread roots in God’s liberating love?

To offer shelter and safety to others?

To welcome difference as part of unity?

May we be people who, like Paul and Silas, sing even in chains.

Who stay when it’s easier to run.

Who open our homes and hearts to those unlike us.

Who live in such love and freedom that the world sees something divine among us.

Amen.