

ACTS 16:25-34
 EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED!

Meet Saddleback Sam! He's not a real person. He was created by Saddleback Church in Southern California to describe the typical person they were trying to contact with the gospel in their community. They described him in all kinds of ways as "the typical unchurched man who lives in our area". He has a college degree; he is in his late 30's, early 40's, married with 2 children; he likes his job, he likes where he lives, he is amongst most affluent of Americans, but carries a lot of debt; he likes to stay fit, so he jogs; he likes to socialize in large groups more than small ones, but also guards his privacy. He is sceptical of organised religion and prefers things to be informal. The Church created Saddleback Sam to understand the people they were trying to target so that they could communicate with them more easily. Lots of churches have followed that example and have described their ideal target audience; there is board outside one Edinburgh church which shows a group of young, perfect, happy people and the hidden message of the board - these are the people we want in our church!

Expect the unexpected when God is at work! God doesn't conform to our expectations of Church. If you had said to Paul in Philippi, "create the ideal church", who would he have picked? People with a background in faith, people who would get on well together because they come from the same background, they have the same personality, they are of the same nationality, indeed Philippi's version of Saddleback Sam! But here's the church in Philippi as it really started: there are three people: first, there is a wealthy woman who had made her money in the 'rag trade', Lydia, a cloth merchant from Turkey, an immigrant; second, a slave girl who had been pestering Paul and had to be exorcised of her demons and converted, the lowest of the low, a female slave who owned nothing, and who was nothing socially, who may have been Greek, but may not; thirdly, a retired Roman soldier, working as a jailer, working in government service, the respectable middle class, probably a Roman himself, proud to be living in Philippi, "Rome in miniature". Three very different people and yet this is the Church in Philippi. There was space and place for all kinds of people, people in whom God was at work; we've seen Lydia's conversion last week, beside the river; you can read the story of the slave girl for yourself and today we think about what happened in prison. Expect the unexpected, because that's way God works. These different are people brought together by the gospel.

Paul and Silas are in prison. They have been arrested in the aftermath of the encounter with the slave girl; her exorcism has created waves and the powerful people who owned her and made money from her, have seen their business disappear. They have had Paul and Silas arrested. They have been beaten and flogged and thrown into prison. So begins a series of events that "expect the unexpected" only begins to describe.

1. Paul and Silas are singing they are in prison; they have been beaten and flogged and what do they do next? They sing and pray: *About midnight...* (Acts 16:25) It's not what you expect people to do in prison; you expect them to shout about injustice; you expect them to be in despair for their situation; you expect them to complain about the conditions; you expect them to sleep; but the Christians are singing and praying, declaring their faith, trusting God. It is certainly not what their fellow-prisoners expected to hear; even in prison, the Christians are declaring their Christian faith.

2. Earthquake - *"Suddenly..."* (Acts 16:26) There is no need to see this as anything other than an unexpected thing; just ask the people of Nepal. These things happen. Generally earthquakes take us by surprise and this one certainly did; it opened the prison doors; it made the jailor think that everyone had escaped and he is about to

fall on his sword before his boss gets there, such is the shame at losing all the prisoners in his charge.

3. Prisoners all still there - *"the jailor..." (Acts 16:27f)* Who knows why? Certainly it took the jailor by surprise; he expected that everyone would take the opportunity to escape, but no! They are all still there; it would seem that none had run away and that the jailor should stay safe.

4. The big question - *"what must..." (Acts 16:30f)* It is midnight, in the middle of the Philippi town jail, and a tough retired soldier, whose world has nearly fallen apart, comes with the biggest question of his life, with the longing of his heart to find life in all its deepest meaning, all its fullness, and he recognises that these Christians can give him that answer. He believes and he and his family are baptised; he has a new found faith at midnight in the town jail. This retired Roman soldier is the third new member of the church in Philippi. Expect the unexpected - God is at work.

Expect the unexpected. You may have a picture in your mind of the people you would like to be part of our Church; we may not create our version of Saddleback Sam, but we do work with a mental picture of the ideal new Christian who will come to join us. Usually they are people like us, however you would describe yourself; or it may be a picture of what it needs to be seen as a successful church, a new demographic. When God is at work, we have to expect the unexpected, because the people whom God draws to Himself through our mission will not always be the people we expect. Nationality, social background, sexuality, age, behaviour – there are all kinds of people that we are being challenged to accept, people whom Jesus is drawing to Himself through our ministry as a congregation and it is not always what we'd expect.

8am-ish on Good Friday a few years ago; I'm in the shop buying my paper; the shop assistant says to me "What does it mean Jesus went down to hell?" There's an unexpected question, in an unexpected place, from perhaps unexpected people! But I answered it. The missionary tells of breakfast being interrupted by man knocking at door asking the question: "What must I do to be saved?" The 6-year old child who comes with the question about "Why is it called Good Friday when it was really bad?" These questions come out of the blue; can you answer them? Or your neighbour across fence, and you're talking to them now that spring is here, asks "why do you go to Church?" Can you answer it? Expect the unexpected and find some way of answering these out-of-blue questions. For the Roman jailor, his question led him to Christian faith and a lifetime of faith and Christian living.

The story of the Roman jailor is the story of a man and his family being transformed by the grace of God. I've put words to that transformation from Psalm 130: it begins in despair - *"Out of..." (Psalm 130:1)* and we can have some sense of that in the story, a man who is ready to fall on his sword; our circumstances are different, but there can still be that sense of helplessness around, we feel weak and there is nothing we can do to change things. For the Psalmist, it is sense of failure, of his faults, *"If you..." (Psalm 130:3)* How many people carry that sense around with them of failure, never quite matching up to the standards or expectations of themselves or others? But here's the transformation that comes to the jailor, that comes to the psalmist and is for us: *"But with you..." (Psalm 130:4)* For the jailor it was being pointed to Jesus that changed his life and believing is such a simple answer; of Jesus "he died that we might be forgiven..." and for those who carry round thoughts of failure, here's the transformation that comes from forgiveness; we become people who learn to trust God and who come to realise that by faith, Jesus transforms our lives. There is something of unexpected about that; we expect that life will simply go on as before and as it always has, we will stay lost, stay in despair, stay with our failures, but Jesus changes all of that!

"Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew these jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself." (CS Lewis; *Mere Christianity* p169)

Expect the unexpected when God is at work: the church is made up of all kinds of people, all different, and we are challenged to learn to accept everyone; out-of-the-blue questions – can we find the answers that lead people to faith; transformation - Jesus changes us, transforms our lives. We learn to put our trust in God, that believing in Jesus is the way to salvation; that God is at work to build His Church.