

## The Church – the people who persevere

### **Acts 16:1-10**

*Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. 2 The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3 Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4 As they travelled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.*

*6 Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. 7 When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. 8 So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. 9 During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*

### **1 John 1:5-10**

*This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. 8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.*

"If you want to walk fast, walk alone. But if you want to walk far, walk together." That's one of these sayings that I have to think about before I react to it. These sayings are described as "motivational" because they're supposed to make you think and inspire you to action. No-one really knows where this saying comes from, or who said it first. It is meant to suggest that we actually achieve more when we work with other people rather than always going it alone; we achieve more together! Walking: you can do it alone or with other people. Walking alone gives some people a sense of peace and their own company for a time, a place to consider the world or simply just look at what's around them. Walking with other people is a place to chat, to talk together, to share stories, to make sense of the world in conversation.

2018 was the Year of Young people in Scotland. To get the most out of that year and help us to celebrate our children and young people, the excellent Fischy Music produced a song: "*Jesus walks beside us in Scotland*". In the song, we were reminded that Jesus walks with us everywhere: "By the burns and the lochs... on the islands and the hills... in the schools and the jails... in the bingos and the chip shops... Jesus walks beside us in Scotland." The song is a great reminder that Jesus walks with us always and everywhere; He walks side by side with us

encouraging us, or He walks out in front leading us on. The challenge for us to make the other side of that coin true as well, that we are people who walk with Jesus, who make it our aim in life to follow Jesus and “walk” in His ways. Today’s Church – people who walk with Jesus.

Large parts of the book of Acts are about journeys. We don’t know much about how Paul travelled, but we assume that most of the time he and his team walked from place to place. Everywhere they went, they told people about Jesus. They had a sense of Jesus with them, and they also had a sense of following where Jesus led them, walking with Him. Most of the time that would be easy and straightforward – “let’s just go to the next town” – and so they moved on and it was unspoken. Jesus walked with them, and they walked in His steps. But there was one exception to that; we read that story in Acts 16.

Paul and his team of friends are on the West side of what is now Turkey. They had travelled across Turkey and had arrived in a province called Mysia. This was a complicated journey. They had tried to turn towards the coast, but that didn’t work. When they got to Mysia, they wanted to turn north towards the Black Sea but that didn’t work either. *“They tried to enter Bithynia but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.” (verse 7)* Earlier, the same Spirit had somehow prevented them from turning west towards the coast. So they went to Troas, a seaport, the place to catch the ferry to Greece, but Paul had no intention of taking the ferry to Greece. But then he had a dream: *“during the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “come over to Macedonia and help us.” (verse 9)* With all the other doors closed, Paul is challenged to consider that here God is opening another door, that Jesus is leading the team to travel to Europe and bring the gospel to Greece.

From the way in which Luke tells the story, this is all about Jesus guiding His people in the way they should go. Some of that is about closed doors, until finally the door opens and through they go. A new chapter in the gospel journey begins. But it wasn’t like that to start with: they travelled north *“having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.” (verse 6)* What does that mean? Did something happen to chase Paul away from some of these towns? Did they have a sense in the pit of their stomach that they should avoid these places? Jesus’ Spirit wouldn’t let them go that way! Then the same thing happened when they tried to go towards the Black Sea, *“the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to”* go north. *(verse 7)* They thought they knew; they wanted to go west and then north, but to walk with Jesus was to go a different way, a better way, and they crossed to Macedonia to bring the gospel to Greece.

Imagine a dilemma you have. There is a choice to make, but you’re not sure which way to choose. You write down all the pros and cons on a piece of paper to try to make it clearer. You know this needs to be a faith matter, so you pray and ask the Lord Jesus to guide you and lead you. Which way will He lead? You try one way, but it doesn’t work out and the way is closed to you; you try another, and the same thing happens; you try the third and the door opens, and the way becomes clear. That’s how it was for Paul, except perhaps for the piece of paper! The way becomes clear, and he takes the ferry to Greece; Jesus leads him, and he

walks with Jesus. Do we have that sense in life: life is a journey walking with Jesus? Jesus leading and guiding us; we trust Him and try to live life in His ways?

John, the apostle, writes to one of the places Paul was not allowed to visit on that trip, probably to the Christians in Ephesus. We are walking, he writes: there are two choices, to walk in darkness or to walk in the light. The better way is to walk in the light because that's where we find Jesus: *"If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin."* (1 John 1:7) Darkness is a bad place to walk, the place where people want to hide, who skulk, who want to get up to no good. It is the place where ego rules and where God is excluded. Light is the better place, a good place, the place where Jesus walks and the place where we can find Him and learn to be like Him. Light shows up our faults and mistakes and we are brought face to face with these faults as they are brought to light for us, but light also shows us grace, love, forgiveness from God through Jesus and that light dispels the darkness of failure and guilt.

Walking with Jesus is about the decisions we make in life, the choices we make. Walking with Jesus is much more about the kind of people we are. Did you walk in your father's footsteps, or your mother's? This is about walking in Jesus' footsteps. Can we learn to love the things that Jesus loved? Can we learn to be like Jesus in the kind of people that we are? Jesus teaches us about values in life, and Jesus models these values. He models love; He models grace, loving people who didn't deserve to be loved; He models a passion for what is right and just; He models complete trust in God – these are His values. We admire these values; when we see these values in Jesus we want to clap because these values are just so good. But best of all, and most challenging of all, we are inspired to live these values for ourselves. We walk with Jesus when we try to love, when we try to be gracious, when we want to do what is right and just, when we try to trust God completely. We walk with Jesus when we try to make His ways our ways, His values our values.

Maybe you're sitting there thinking, "I can't walk very far anymore"; or "all this talk of walking is making me tired!" You'll be glad then that "walking with Jesus" is a picture of what life is all about! "Walking with Jesus" is about being the kind of people Jesus wants us to be; "walking with Jesus" is about doing the things that Jesus wants us to do. As we've seen, that is not always easy or straightforward; ego still rules its ugly head at times, and we want to go our way. Will we be "the church – people who walk with Jesus"? Will Jesus' ways be our ways; will Jesus' values be our values? Jesus walks with us; will we walk with Him?