

SERMON – 8 JANUARY 2017: Rev Dr Brenda Robson

10,000 REASONS

(Scripture Reading: Acts 16:22–34)

My text this morning is Acts 16:25 – **About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the other prisoners were listening to them.**

It's easy to sing and praise God when things are going well, when we are thankful, when we are full of joy, things to celebrate – a birth, a baptism, an engagement, wedding, anniversary, new job, retirement, a great holiday, a new house

But there are other times when our lives are hard, our strength is weak, our faith is shaky, the future seems uncertain, then it is more difficult to sing, to praise God.

The verses that God laid on my heart this week, verses for this new year, are from Acts 16.

Paul and Silas had been spreading the good news – but upsetting the authorities – specifically they had driven out a spirit from a woman who had been predicting the future but she had made a lot of money for her owners by doing this and so they were angry with Paul and Silas.

Paul and Silas had been seized and dragged to the market place, stripped and beaten – severely flogged, thrown in prison and fastened by the feet to stocks so they could not escape or even move around.

Not much to sing about there then – but we are told that at midnight they were praying and singing hymns!

When I read these verses, I listened again to one of my favourite worship songs – 10,000 Reasons by Matt Redman. The song was written about 6 years ago. Matt lives in the south of England with his wife and five children and he is invited all over the world to sing his songs and lead worship. I heard him a couple of years ago in Edinburgh sing this very song along with several hundred young people praising God. The words are on the back of the order of service and I will play it when we take up our offering.

The song about having 10,000 reasons and more to sing praises to God.

The sun comes up

It's a new day dawning

Its time to sing your song again

Whatever may pass and whatever lies before me

Let me be singing when the evening comes

Whatever may pass and **whatever** lies before me – including the hard things, the tragic, the rubbish things that happen in our lives– let me be singing

I discovered this book a few days ago – 10,000 Reasons – Stories of Faith, Hope and Thankfulness inspired by the Worship Anthem. Matt Redman wrote the book last year in 2016 and the foreword is by Max Lucado. It arrived in my house this week within 12 hours of ordering thanks to the amazing service of Amazon Prime. On Wednesday morning I look after by two year old granddaughter Alba, arriving at her house at 7.30 am to let her dad go off to work and her mum go to bed after she comes home from night shift at Edinburgh Royal. This week Alba slept until 9.40 am and I read the whole book in two hours!

It is an amazing book, full of moving stories of people who have sung this song and listened to this song in the most desperate of circumstances. People who have found stronger faith and hope and thankfulness in the face of adversity. Whatever may pass and whatever lies before me – people who are modern day Pauls and Silases.

In fact, Matt refers to Acts 16 – page 64 – **Paul and Silas were in jail. Their hands and feet were bound in the stocks and they'd been treated unfairly (a bit of an understatement!). In the darkness of that prison most of our hearts would perhaps give way to fear, discouragement or dejection. But not Paul and Silas. Their bodies might have been chained up but their spirits were free. And what were they doing? Singing. From their lips came songs of worship, trust and praise. And that praise became their soundtrack for a miraculous release from prison.**

We are familiar with the awful suffering of Job – but in Job 35 : 10 it says that **God our Maker gives us songs in the night.** Songs in the darkness.

And Jesus himself sang a hymn of praise at the end. Matthew 26 describes the last supper and at the end of the Passover meal it was customary to sing a hymn of praise, often what we know as Psalm 136, the Great Hallelujah. Jesus is in his final hours on earth, he has turned his face towards Gethsemane and the cross in full knowledge of what is to come, and still he sings with his friends “His love endures forever....his love endures forever.... His love endures forever.

Matt Redman tells the story of two men in Indonesia, arrested in 2005 and sentenced to death for trying to smuggle heroin out of the country - Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran, known as Myu, referred to in the press as the Bali Nine.

Andrew was 21 years old at the time, born and raised in Sydney, Australia by Chinese immigrant parents. Myu was 24, born in London and raised in Australia.

They were in prison in Indonesia, on death row, for about nine years. Early on, Andrew became a Christian and he was so passionate about his Lord that Myu became a Christian too.

Maybe initially Andrew thought that God would set him free, like Paul and Silas. When he realised that this was not likely, he wrote -

"When I got back to my cell, I said, 'God, I asked you to set me free, not kill me.' God spoke to me and said, 'Andrew, I have set you free from the inside out, I have given you life!' From that moment on I haven't stopped worshipping Him. I had never sung before, never led worship, until Jesus set me free."

Andrew eventually became a pastor in prison. He and Myu shared the gospel with other prisoners. They knew they would never leave the prison alive but they wanted other young men to accept Christ and leave prison to live different lives.

They were befriended by an Australian pastor, Christie Buckingham – she visited regularly, she supported them and she tried to campaign against their death sentences.

One Friday in April 2015 she got words to go and catch a plane immediately because they were to be executed on Tuesday.

The story is different from Paul and Silas because Andrew and Myu didn't have any miraculous last minute reprieve, no earthquake opening prison doors, no escape from prison and the death sentence. But they praised God with their last breath. Taken out into the execution yard, they spoke and prayed with Pastor Christie for the last time. They refused blindfolds so that they could look their executioners in the eye and forgive them. They began to sing –

Verses from Hillsong – He is mighty to save, mighty to save.....take me as you find me, all my fears and failures

And then they sang Amazing Grace.

Then, finally, 10,000 Reasons – whatever may pass and whatever lies before me, let me be singing when the evening comes

The end draws near and my time has come, still my soul will sing your praise unending, 10,000 years and for evermore.

And then they were executed. Not every story has a happy ending, at least from our earthly reasoning. Prayers and vigils and a powerful ministry by these men in prison did not stop the death penalty being carried out.

But even in the execution yard they glorified God, as Pastor Christie commented, the place of horror became holy ground.

Sometimes we simply have no idea why things happen, there is no explanation this side of heaven. But we trust in Emmanuel, God with us.

If we can't sing ourselves, we can listen to our favourite hymns and worship songs and let them minister to us. And other people might hear too.

The other prisoners and the jailor heard Paul and Silas singing. As a result the jailor and all his family became followers of Jesus. The jailor washed their wounds, wounds he may have inflicted with the shackles, a humble act of repentance, and then he was baptized.

With social media and global communication, many more people can be reached by seeing outstanding acts of faith and witness.

Matt Redman's book is full of positive stories of lives touched and changed. One story you might be familiar with, because it featured on the main BBC news programmes last year.

Reuben Hill was a fit, healthy young man in his early twenties, studying for a PhD in physics in London and a member of a judo squad. One day he collapsed with no warning and tests revealed a tumour the size of a golf ball growing in the area of his brain responsible for speech and language.

Surgeons decided to use a new experimental procedure involving laser technology, the very same laser equipment that Reuben was working with in his lab. So he was fascinated and terrified at the same time.

Towards the end of the surgery, still on the operating table, Reuben was brought round from anaesthetic and asked to speak and to sing to let the surgeons know if there was any brain damage. You can see this on the BBC news on Youtube - it is very emotional. In a croaky, deep voice he sings -

The sun comes up
It's a new day dawning
Its time to sing your song again
Whatever may pass
And whatever lies before me
Let me be singing
When the evening comes.

And he continued, on the BBC news -

Bless the Lord O my soul
O My soul
Worship his holy name

Reuben is making a good recovery, the tumour was found to be nonmalignant. Matt Redman met him later and was able to ask him why he chose that song. Matt wrote (page 93) -

Reuben told me that he'd decided beforehand that if they asked him to test his cognition and speech facilities in this way, then he would sing a song of thanks, trust and praise. And there it is again : he had *decided*.

Yes, sometimes worship is a spontaneous overflow. But very often it's a decision. It's the choice we make, come what may, we will be found with a song of thanks and praise in our hearts and on our lips. So in that intense moment, with the BBC cameras rolling, Reuben chose to sing his song of faith and his song went all around the world.....Its obvious that God has ordained music as part of his blessing and presence in this world and whether it's an age-old psalm or a new composition, those songs can show up in our lives and accompany both our brightest moments and our toughest moments.

Indeed, God can use our toughest times to make us more fruitful in the land of our suffering. That phrase is from Genesis 41 : 52. Joseph had suffered much – he had been thrown into a pit by his brothers and sold into slavery, separated from his family and his own people. He had been falsely accused and sent to prison, losing his status and his freedom. He could have been bitter and angry. But he looked back over his life and saw only God's grace, naming his second son Ephraim meaning, **God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.**

We all carry scars, some physical, some emotional. We can think of scars as something ugly to be covered up and hidden. Or we can think about them as deep reminders of how far we have come through pain or stress or failure and have overcome in Jesus.

Matt Redman commented "Scars are not just a record of our wounds. They are a display of our healing." We look back and see provision and protection and grace.

And if you are in the middle of a time of trial at this moment, know that God is closer than you can ever imagine. You will get through this. You will be an overcomer in Christ. And you will look back on this time and see the hand of God in your life.

Let us decide, like Reuben, to make 2017 the year of song, the year of praising God. Sing songs of thanks and trust and praise and through the singing we will become more thankful and more trusting and praising God will be constantly on our lips and in our hearts.

AMEN

Book reference: 10,000 Reasons – Stories of Faith, Hope and Thankfulness Inspired by the Worship Anthem – by Matt Redman and Craig Borlase 2016.