

Sermon Holmbury St. Mary 18th May 2025 – Easter 5

(Readings for Easter 6 – swapped!)

Acts 16: 9-15 Man from Macedonia – conversion of Lydia at Philippi

During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 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.

From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we travelled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

John 5.1-9 (Healing of lame man at the pool of Bethesda)

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, the paralysed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

“Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no-one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath.

Prayer

Lord, as you opened Lydia’s heart to respond to Paul’s message, we pray that you would open our hearts today, that we might hear what you have to say to us, and respond in faith and obedience. In Jesus name, Amen.

Introduction

The gospel reading reminds me of a pastor preaching in the deep south of America. He said, “if this church is going to go anywhere, it must pick up its mat and walk.” True to form, the congregation replied, “Amen, preacher, let it walk”. Encouraged by this, he said more confidently, “if this church is going to really make a difference, it needs to cast off everything that hinders it, and really run!” The people came back with, “Say it brother, let it run”. Getting into his stride, he shouted, “This church needs to rise up on wings like an eagle, and fly!” The response delighted him. “Hallelujah! Let it fly, let it fly!” Then he said, “But if this church is going to fly, it needs money!” The folk there said, “Let it walk, brother, let it walk.”

Actually I am not going to talk about either the reading from John’s gospel nor money! But those of you who attended last week’s Annual parish meeting may guess what made me think of this story. The truth is that it isn’t money that the church here, or anywhere, needs. It is to understand what we are here for, and to seek God to enable us to fulfill that mission.

What drove Peter, Paul and the other apostles?

I don't normally speak from the pulpit in St. Mary's church. In truth there are two reasons why I shy away from climbing these steps.

The first is that there is a risk that in doing so I am installing a barrier between you and me, suggesting that I have some kind of authority or, as someone has put it, placing myself six feet above correction. In fact, every single one of my sermons is preached first and foremost to myself, and none more so than today's.

The second reason is the verse that is written around this pulpit. Have you ever read it and wondered about it? It comes from Romans 10. Paul quotes from the prophet Joel, *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* Then he goes on to say, *"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'"* This always makes me very ashamed, because I am the worst person in the world for telling other people about Jesus – and yet Paul is saying that it is absolutely essential. People need to hear the wonderful good news and we the church are the only ones here to tell them.

Peter, Paul and the other apostles, and countless others down the ages, have been driven by the conviction that God loves people and yearns for them to come to know him, and alongside that, the urgent truth that PEOPLE NEED THE LORD.

God loves each one of us personally. He has given us meaning and hope. And this has made a difference in our lives – otherwise why come to church at all? When people try to follow Jesus and allow his teachings to guide their lives, it changes them. And his way of love, gentleness, kindness, forgiveness, compassion, humility and right living has the potential to change the world. It has transformed nations, and can do so again. People need the Lord – the world needs the Lord.

We, the Church, are dirty, cracked, unattractive vessels, but we have this amazing treasure within. Sometimes we get so depressed looking at our failures and weaknesses as individuals and as a body, that we forget that it is not us, but the glorious good news that we carry that is all-important. *That* is what people need – not the Church or us. There is plenty wrong with us, and with the Church, and that can get in the way and put people off. But all that doesn't change the fact that God longs for people to turn their lives around. And he chooses us, with all our imperfections, to tell them this.

The Conversion of Lydia

And so let's turn to our New Testament reading, from the book of Acts. Wendy read to us the story of how Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke came to the city of Philippi, and the beautiful way in which Lydia became the first follower of Jesus in Europe.

Let me take you through the story and then pick out four lessons we can learn about sharing our faith.

Paul and his companions were on a journey to visit the fledgling churches that had sprung up on Paul's first grand tour, but also to preach the good news to as many people, and in as many new places as possible. They had a very clear sense of mission.

For one reason or another Paul and his friends were prevented from following their initial plans. Luke writes that the Holy Spirit wouldn't let them preach the gospel in the Roman provinces of Bithynia and Asia. But now, in the night, Paul has a vision of a man of Macedonia, begging him, "Come over to

Macedonia and help us.” They conclude that this is a command from God and straight away they sail to Macedonia, and come to the leading city of that area – Philippi.

Normally whenever they came to a new place, Paul would go to a place where he knew there was already some spiritual interest and understanding – the Jewish synagogue. His strategy was to start off talking to Jews, with whom he shared a common cultural heritage and where he knew there was a foundation of knowledge of the Scriptures and awareness of prophecies about the Messiah.

However, it seems that there was no synagogue at Philippi. Instead, they found an outdoor place of prayer by the river. There a group of women used to meet. One of them was Lydia, who is described as a “worshipper of God.” That suggests she was not a Jew, but someone who had a spiritual hunger, and was attracted to the faith of her Jewish friends. She reminds me of other pioneering gentiles – the Ethiopian Eunuch and Cornelius, the Roman Centurion who invited Peter to come to his house to share the gospel.

Paul and his friends share the good news about Jesus with the women, and Luke records simply, “The Lord opened Lydia’s heart to respond to Paul’s message”. She then invited them to come to stay in her home, and they then used that as their base of operations in Philippi. From these small beginnings, the Philippian church sprang to life.

Four lessons

The first lesson I learn from this story is that God is the driving force behind the spread of the Gospel. God clearly directed the missionary team where to go. He is the inspiration and guide for all evangelistic effort. We can make plans, but these will come to nothing if they are not in alignment with God’s strategy. Moreover, it was God who opened Lydia’s heart. We cannot convert anyone, he alone can perform the miracle that enables someone to believe.

But, if God is the director of all missionary endeavour, if he has the power to open hearts and minds, and if the people of Macedonia needed to hear the gospel so urgently, then why couldn’t He just jump in and tell them directly? Why did he need Paul and the others?

This is the second lesson I want to draw out. In almost every case God chooses to use a human agent to bring his message. Even in Paul’s case, where he met Jesus in a blinding light on the Damascus road, there was still another disciple, called Ananias involved.

Lesson 1 was that God is the inspiration and power behind evangelism, but (lesson 2) he chooses to involve, and even depend on, human beings in this work.

This leads me on to lesson 3: Evangelism doesn’t just happen, we need to be intentional about it. We may tell ourselves that if our character and behaviour are sufficiently Christlike, people will come to us and ask us about our faith. St. Francis of Assisi is supposed to have said, “Preach the gospel always, use words if necessary.” This might have been effective for St. Francis, but even Jesus didn’t wait for people to approach him. Paul had a clear mission to preach the gospel, and indeed this very pulpit quotes him asking, “*how can they hear without someone preaching to them?*” Our character and behaviour should be powerful witnesses to Christ, but it is very rare that they will be enough. We should be praying and seeking for opportunities to start up conversations about spiritual things. We don’t need to start by blurting out what we believe, nor aggressively challenge others about what they believe. Instead, we can respectfully ask them about their beliefs, and then be ready for them to ask about ours. Quoting St. Francis again, let us seek first to understand, rather than be understood, to listen before speaking.

The fourth lesson is that we don't need to try to crack the toughest nuts first. To be sure, that is sometimes God's strategy. For most of us it is better to look for people with spiritual questions, who are sympathetic to faith, or at least not vehemently opposed to it. Paul certainly wasn't someone to run away from a fight, but nevertheless he headed to the place of prayer rather than the debating arena first.

I remember someone describing how to pluck a ripe mango from a tree. You gently take the mango in your hand and give the tiniest tug. If there is any resistance – leave it, the fruit is not ripe. The ripe fruit will drop into your hand without any struggle. That is how it can be when we share the good news. Some people just aren't ready to listen. They may enjoy intellectual discussions about God, but you will probably find that you can argue with them till you are blue in the face but they will not be persuaded. We can't convert or persuade anyone to believe. It is all up to God. We shouldn't be discouraged when we encounter people who are not yet ready to listen. Sometimes we will just be planting a seed, which may take many years to bear fruit. We can back off from that person, but not give up. Rather keep trying until we find someone whose heart God has opened. Lydia was ripe fruit: ready to believe in Jesus. God was already at work there, and she just needed to hear the message to embrace it.

Sum up

So here are my four lessons again:

1. God is always the inspiration, guide and power behind true evangelism
2. But God doesn't like to work alone. He chooses to involve human beings in this work.
3. We need to be intentional about bearing witness to our faith in Jesus.
4. We can start with the more promising environments and people first. We are looking for ripe fruit, there is no need to struggle with people who show no spiritual interest.

Jesus calls us to be fishers of men, to go and make disciples and to carry his message of love and forgiveness to the world. God is waiting for us to play our part, if we don't take the initiative it probably won't happen.

So what should we do? We don't need to have any special skills or training. We don't need a deep knowledge of the Bible.

How about we ask for God to show us one person, and to help us to pray for them regularly. We can pray that he would open their heart to believe. And we can ask him for opportunities to start up conversations about spiritual things with that person. When the opportunity comes, be prepared just to be yourself, tell your own story and say what God means to you. That will be enough. If they aren't interested, don't worry but keep going and start the same cycle again.

Let's pray.

Father, thank you for the wonderful good news of Jesus, who died and rose again for us. Thank you for the people through whom we first came to learn about you. Help us to share our story and our experience with others. Thank you that it's not up to us whether or not they listen. **Amen**