

The Gospel comes to Europe

Acts 16.6-15

Over the past few weeks we've been looking at the start of the book of Acts, from the time of Jesus' Ascension to the Day of Pentecost, finishing with the wonderful description of the first church that completes Acts Chapter 2. We're now taking a leap forwards to look at another hugely significant moment in history, recorded for us here in Acts Chapter 16.

At face value, the story we read in verses 6 to 15 isn't very exciting. Paul and his companions, whom we believe included Luke, who wrote the book of Acts for us, are travelling through parts of what we now know as Turkey. But as they look to go inland, they find God seems to be blocking their way. We're not given the details - maybe at the practical level things just weren't working out, but at the same time they had a distinct sense God was somehow behind things and wanted them to head in a different direction.

Instead, Paul has a vision of a man from Greek Macedonia calling them to come to him. There's no suggestion this was someone they knew, or even if it was someone they actually met later - as was sometimes the case (I think of how the Holy Spirit spoke to Peter about going to visit the Roman centurion Cornelius, after a vision Peter had in Acts Chapter 10). This time it seems it was more of a general calling. But they sense it was from God, and so make the short journey across the sea to Neapolis and then on to Philippi. It's so smooth the voyage only takes two days - in Acts 20 the return trip takes five! The point is this:

It is at this moment that the Gospel first reaches Europe: the good news of Jesus Christ, the reality of his promises and the hope we have for this life and beyond, arrives quietly and without fuss. Often when Paul sailed, there'd be a shipwreck - in 2 Corinthians 11.25 Paul says it happened to him three times! But this time the sea-crossing itself was uneventful. What makes this passage so dramatic is its significance: it is a massive moment in history.

I take several things from this. The first is that God is clearly at work here - left to their own devices, Paul and his friends would have taken a different path, perhaps one that was more familiar to them. Indeed, according to Chapter 15.36, Paul's plan was to go back and visit churches they had already established on previous journeys, not to look for new ones. That's how they begin the journey. But at the same time Paul was faithful to God's calling, attentive to his voice, and responsive to God's vision, and changed his plans accordingly.

In his commentary on this passage, John Scott gives other examples when this happened: David Livingstone, who famously travelled as a missionary journey into central Africa, had actually wanted to go to China, while William Carey ended up in India despite wanting to go to the Polynesian Islands in the Pacific. It doesn't mean God cares more for one people group than another of course - just that there's a particular moment of opportunity somewhere. So it's perhaps worth noting that one of the places Paul had wanted to go to, but was unable to visit, was Nicea, where a few centuries later one of the foundational statements of Christian faith, the Nicene Creed, would be finalised.

Secondly, all they did then was what they had been called and trained to do - arriving somewhere new, they looked for people who might give them a hearing, to share the gospel with them. They didn't set out to conquer Europe - they were just looking for the next person to talk to in the next Roman Province they came to.

Which brings me to the third thing. To meet people, they fitted in to the pattern and rhythm of life where they'd arrived. In towns or cities where there was no Jewish Synagogue, it was customary for people to go and pray by the river on the Sabbath, so Paul and his friends knew that was where they were most likely to find people they could connect with.

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One of these people was named Lydia, and God opens her heart to receive the message Paul brings. It seems she was a successful businesswoman, signified by her status as a trader in rich purple cloth, and someone who herself had also travelled to Greece from Asia Minor where her home city of Thyatira was. She invites the travellers to stay with her.

Again, there are several things to note here:

Notice how we're told it was God who opened her heart to hear the message, but God still used Paul to bring it. This seems to be how God likes to work. It's exactly how Jesus told the disciples things would work before he ascended back into heaven, in Acts 1.8:

*"But you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth."*

God entrusts his message of hope and promise to us, then invites us to work with him to take it out to the world around us. Because it is a message of love, of extravagant grace and boundless compassion, it is a message carried most effectively in the hearts of those who have been captivated by the beauty of Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit, who speak from a position of faith. It relies on trust, and relationship. That's how God works.

I might think there could be easier ways to let people know about Jesus, but God knows the best ways. Lydia, I am certain, could see Paul's faith and his commitment - and she also knew what it was to travel, which may have been part of how they connected too.

And when Lydia came to faith, she did so with her whole household. We tend to think of faith as a personal or an individual matter. It reflects our culture. But for most of history, and in much of the world, such decisions are taken together, by a family or a community. It's a different way of thinking perhaps. But we still see it today in the promises that parents and godparents make when a child comes for baptism.

Passing on our faith to our children, and often their children, isn't something which we've perhaps understood very well in more recent times: we've tended to delegate it to Sunday School teachers or schools. But, when it works well, the intimacy of family is where values are shared. For some, I know this is a difficult and a sensitive area. What we see here in this Bible passage may be how we would like it to be, but it may not be our reality. The best advice I can share is to keep praying for those we love and keep blessing them.

As we draw this Series of Online Services to a close, it may be that's what we need to hold on to. Read on in Chapter 16 of the Book of Acts and you'll see how events did become more dramatic, and Paul and Silas ended up in prison for their faith. But by God's grace they had first established a small fellowship - a church - in Philippi. They had a base, had made friends, and had some support. Some years later, Paul would write his famous letter to the Philippians. It is a letter of joy - the commentary I have is subtitled "Rejoicing and Thanksgiving." It all grew from God's work on the banks of a river and after a quiet sea crossing. And from these humble beginnings, the gospel in Europe continued to grow.

Where is God calling you? It may not be to a different place - he may just want to show you something new where you are. He may call you as the messenger, or to hear his message: often, like Paul, we do both. Or maybe this is your 'Lydia moment' - for God to open your heart to hear his voice. Maybe it's a voice you've not listened to for a while? Our weekly Online Services from St James may be drawing to a close, but the worldwide church continues to share the good news of Jesus, day in and day out, week in and week out.

If you've not yet said "Yes!" then please don't be afraid. For, as Paul, and Silas, and Luke, and Lydia and her family discovered, a whole new adventure awaits. Jesus died and rose again that we might live. It's time for us to set sail and join the voyage too. In Jesus' name, Amen.