

ACTS 16:1-15
GOD THE MISSIONARY

God is working His purpose out. That is a statement of faith; I'm not sure we'd all find it easy to make that statement at present. Is God working out His purpose in the Church in Scotland? In some places it looks as if God's plan and purpose is to knock the Church down, rather than build the Church up! It is a Church that is divided; it is a Church that is soul-searching for its future; is it a Church that has lost its way? How is God working out His purpose? In our own lives, many people are confused about what to believe; God seems a long way away; faith is a struggle; life is tough and people are facing up to all kinds of difficult days. God is working His purpose out? We're not entirely sure we'd subscribe to that idea. God working out His purpose in the world: but the world seems so full of suffering and bad things, that God seems to have gone away; it is as if somehow He has abdicated responsibility for things. We find it hard to make that statement of faith and if we do make it, beware of making it seem a trite and shallow declaration of faith in the face of facts.

When we try to find our way in God's plan and purpose, it is hard to know what that is. I was saying at the Stated Annual Meeting that I get the sense that we are a Church in transition, in a time of change, but I'm not entirely sure what that means. Churches are not very good at taking risks; we're not very good at trying something without feeling that it needs to succeed first time; we don't like failure. But that's exactly what we have to learn to do as a church. When we pray personally, we're looking for God to answer our prayers, to guide us with a particular choice we have to make, or a situation that needs to be resolved – what will the solution be? Somehow we expect that solution to be presented to us on a plate, as a fully rounded answer to our prayers with all i's dotted and t's crossed. Here's the thing: that's not the way God usually works. Churches try things, and some might work, and some might not; some might work for a time, and then not work anymore; as individuals we push at doors, some might open, some might stay firmly shut. God is working His purpose out!

We like Church to be neat and tidy: "this is church and we like it this way"; we don't like when it gets a bit untidy or when it changes. We're going to look at the story of the church in Acts 16-19 over the next few weeks, at the church's mission and the places and people involved in that mission and the ways in which God is at work. Why? Well, the Church in Scotland is no longer in command of our culture; we used to live in Christendom where the culture and our society were shaped by the church and the church was the centre of the community. The Church in 2015 Scotland is no longer the centre of society and culture; there was an article in *The Spectator* this week which suggested that the SNP has taken the place of the Church of Scotland. We are much more a mission group, people who have a story to tell. To whom will we tell it? Where will we find these people? Who will do the story-telling? Today - God is the missionary; God is on a mission. The Church has a mission because have a missionary God. But how does God go about that mission? One thing is sure, it won't be neat and tidy!

We're in the world of travelling preachers. Paul and Silas are the main characters in today's reading. They are sent out by the Church to tell people what the church has decided and so they are travelling through Asia (modern-day Turkey) revisiting Churches that they had visited before and helping them, encouraging them in their faith. They are solid Christian leaders! They take with them Timothy: people speak well of Timothy; he is the son of a mixed marriage, his mother a Jew, his father a Greek; some might say that he didn't belong in either world, but in Christian mission, he belongs to both Church worlds; he belongs to the Jewish Christian world through mother and his granny; he belongs in the Greek world through his dad; he can speak

to both; he knows both 'languages' and both will listen. God has given him to Paul and Silas and off they go together. The churches grew.

"Where will we go next?" The three men are travelling across central Turkey; they are wondering where to go next? They are praying about it? Are they asking God to guide them? "Will we go into Asia, after we've crossed through Phrygia?" Asia is not what we call Asia; today; Asia is the coastal part of Turkey that you might visit on holiday. "*Paul and...*" (16:6) The door is closed! How did Paul know that? Did something happen to stop him? Was he ill? We don't know. They travel on and come to Mysia, where they tried to turn right, to turn north, to go towards the Black Sea coast. "*when they...*" (16:7) The door is closed again. Yet again, we've no idea of how that happened and what it meant. "Lord, are You working out your purpose? Where shall we go? All the doors are closed. All we've met are dead ends!" What next? They went to Troas, the seaport to Europe, maybe wondering if every door was going to be closed! "*During the ...*" (16:9f) Here was answer to their prayers; here is the open door for which they had been waiting, searching, praying; Macedonia, Europe – they'd never thought of that before? How will the gospel get on in Europe?

Ministers starting out on their ministry ask the question "how do I know which place is right for me? How will God show me?" I say, you push at doors and if some doors stay firmly shut, another door will open; one application will get nowhere, not even to interview, but another will be greeted with delight by a congregation and the door will open and might lead to ministry in that place. You are looking for a nursing home for an elderly relative, you've prayed about it, but how do you find right place? You push at doors and some will stay shut because there are no places in that home; or you will shut doors because you don't like the place; but another door will open and you'll like what you see and there will be a place and it might take a little time, but it will happen. A job, a university place, a church – there are all kinds of issues and so often this is the way in which God guides. He guides the apostles to a new mission field by shutting doors and opening one more; God is working, God is on a mission and He will be at work to guide and lead His people on their way.

We come to Philippi, the first record of the gospel being preached in Europe. How significant is this? Philippi was a Roman colony, full of retired Roman soldiers, and we'll meet one next week; there was the buzz of city life going on; it was called "Rome in miniature" because the people dressed and behaved, and their laws were like Rome. As for faith: there were not enough people in Philippi to have a synagogue; so we might think there is not much faith there! "*On the...*" (16:13) This is "Church" but by a very loose definition of church; a group of women meeting by the river to pray. Paul, Silas and Timothy went to meet them. It was a small group of women and there must have been the temptation to say "is that it? We've come all this way to meet a small group of women?" But these women were praying, looking for God, meeting God in their prayers and Paul takes their prayer group and talks to them about Jesus and Lydia becomes a Christian. Here is the beginning of the Church in Philippi; it goes on to become a well-known Church and the people grow to love Paul and he loves them; read his letter to the Philippians and you'll see what they become. Here's the start, a small group of women praying and Lydia's new found faith. Her faith is new, her faith is a bit shaky: "*The Lord...*" (16:14f) God is at work in these small beginnings; the church is still there; God is still at work.

The Church in Philippi is a few women by the river, praying. There are so many things about church that we get worried about: agendas, rotas, money and all are important to make the church work. But the Church at Philippi, a few women praying, reminds us of something that is hugely important, but so easy to forget. In essence, the Church is a group of people with Jesus at the centre. Why do we get caught up

with numbers? Last Messy Church, we could be disappointed, there were “only” 20 people there when we have had 45 at times, but the quality of conversations within that group of 20 was brilliant and not possible in a group of 45 - God is at work; Church is a group of people with Jesus at the centre. That's who we are and that's what makes an impact on the world; that's what will serve the mission of God in our place, that the Church is, that we are a group of people with Jesus at the centre and as in Philippi we demonstrate that by our praying. The way in which we understand the Church will shape the way we think and how we work. Is it an institution to preserve? Or is it a people to grow?

God is at work; God is the mover in this story; God did, God did; God is the missionary. When we look at this episode in the life of the Church, it is very clear who is at work in the story. Paul, Silas and Timothy, the travelling preachers, are looking for guidance: “*having been...*” “*they tried...*” “*we got...*” “*the Lord...*” (16:6,7,10,14) God is at work, closing doors in order to open up another; the Spirit is at work guiding these travelling preachers and then at work opening Lydia's heart to hear, accept and believe the gospel. God is at work in this story; God is the mover in this story, and the apostles react and behave keeping in step with the Spirit. Mission is something that God does... “It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his Church in the world, but God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the Church is made for mission - God's mission.” (Wright *The Mission of God* p62) God is at work in the world and in the church and we sometimes have to run to catch up; the people we engage with are not always the people we would choose, but are the people that God puts in our way, the people whom God inspires to come join us; it is not always neat and tidy, but when God is at work “neat and tidy” is not always the way He works. God is at work; God is on a mission; God is *the* missionary.

Here's the challenge for us: to be people with a sense of God in our lives. Paul, Silas and Timothy were praying, looking for God to guide them. Lydia and the other women were praying, looking for the blessing of God on their lives. They were people with a sense of God, guiding, leading. The challenge for us is to have a sense of God involved in our lives. Can we learn to understand that it is God who guides us, God who looks over us, God who blesses us; can we learn to understand that our lives are shaped by God's presence with us, and by God's influence over us and can we learn that our lives are not shaped by touching wood or crossing our fingers? The Church in Philippi was a few women praying beside the river and the apostles went to find them and join them and tell them about Jesus. The Church is group of people with Jesus at the centre. The Church is people, people who believe, who worship who pray; the church is people not an institution. The Church is people with Jesus at the centre and we need both of these to make it work; we show that by our praying, by our worship, by our Bible reading, by living in the ways that Jesus wants. God is at work; God is working out His purpose in us, in the church, in the world; may we have a sense of God in our lives; pray that God will help us keep in step with Jesus!