

ACTS 16:9-15  
GOD, THE CHURCH AND GOOD NEWS

Sitting by the side of the river talking about important things – it sounds idyllic! I have a picture in my mind of a sunny Saturday morning and a group of people are gathering; they do it every Saturday, it is a regular event, at a regular place to meet, beside the river and they meet to pray together and to talk about important things. This particular Saturday, they have some guests, new people who have come to visit and they are welcome; they take part in the prayer-service and are invited to speak. There are important things to talk about; new things to hear about; there are some things to reflect upon that might be challenging, even life-changing; this little group is happy to be challenged by new things because they see how important they are.

Where do we go to talk about important things? A few years ago I read this about Scotland and our way of thinking: “We go to church to be entertained and we go to the theatre to be challenged”. It should be the other way round, but that is the way lots of people see the church; they have big questions, but for some reason don't see the church as the place where we talk about big questions and issues; the church is place to be entertained! I was reminded the other day of a big question: “Why does it always rain on me?” You might recognise that as the title of a song by Travis, complaining that life is hard and things always just seem to go wrong; the next line: “is it because I lied when I was 17?” Is there a sense of injustice, even guilt, of God punishing? It is a big question; where do we talk about these big questions? The Church? The theatre? Do we come to Church to have an encounter with God and with the big questions of life? Of course, we can be entertained at the same time!

This encounter by the side of the river in Philippi was not as straight-forward as it might seem. Paul and his friends were travelling through Turkey and everywhere they went they were telling people the stories of Jesus and some believed these stories and some didn't; some became Christians and some became angry. He was wondering where to go next: he tried to go South, but the door was closed to their preaching, though we're not told why; he tried to go North, but again the was door closed by the Spirit. So they went the only way left open to them, down to the coast, to the port of Troas, not far from the historical city of Troy. “*During the...*” (Acts 16:9) This vision in his dream made such a powerful impression on Paul that he decided he needed to act on it. “*After...*” (Acts 16:10) After all the doors had been closed across Turkey, here was a door opening to Europe and for the first time, the apostles take the good news of Jesus into Europe, to the city of Philippi. God, it seemed, was leading them in a new direction.

Philippi was a Roman colony, “Rome in miniature”. People dressed as they did in Rome; the same laws applied; the citizens of Philippi were tax-exempt, just as Roman citizens were. Many of the people of Philippi were retired soldiers, who had been given a piece of land by the government as a reward for their loyal service to the empire. In any new place that he visited, Paul's strategy was to look for the local synagogue; the gospel was for Jews and Gentiles and his first tactic was to find the local Jewish synagogue to go there and tell them about Jesus. But there was no synagogue in Philippi; it needed ten men to be allowed to set up a synagogue, but obviously there were not ten Jewish men in the city. So they went looking; they needed another strategy; they looked for another place.

*“On the...” (Acts 16:13)* So on the Saturday morning beside the river outside the city of Philippi, Paul and his friends meet this little group of women who have met to pray. There is no official meeting place, simply this place where they were accustomed to meet and to hold a little gathering for prayer, perhaps a little prayer service because it was the Sabbath day. One of these women is called Lydia; she had made the same journey that Paul has just made, across to Greece from Turkey; she is a business woman, the local agent perhaps for the manufacturer of purple cloth in her home town and her job is to sell the cloth in market place, to deal and to trade. She has also come to understand a little about God and has joined this little group to pray; she has a sense that God is important and that prayer is a good thing; the little group invites Paul and his friends to join them.

So Paul began to tell them the stories of Jesus. There is no copy of his talk, so we don't know exactly what he said to this little group, but we know from other places that at the centre of his talk would be the person of Jesus. It would be all about Jesus. To the Jews, Paul would talk about Jesus as the Messiah, completing all the plans and promises of God to bless the world by the gift of the Messiah and that this Messiah has come and His name is Jesus. To the others, Jesus is the Saviour of whole world, God come into world in human flesh and blood, the living God instead of the dead idols of wood and stone of the Greek and Roman culture. As Paul talked to this little group and told them about Jesus, the Spirit of God was at work in Lydia: something inside her made sense of all of this; it was a light-bulb moment for her when everything that Paul was talking about clicked into place and she became a Christian: *“the Lord...” (Acts 16:14)* God was in that place; God was in that conversation; God was in their hearts and she believed. There are two ways then of expressing her new faith: first of all, she was baptised, making her public profession of faith; secondly, she allied herself with the gospel publicly and offered Paul and his friends a place to stay for their time in Philippi! So the Church in Philippi begins.

What do we see here?

1. We see an outward-looking Church: in a sense they had no option; Paul and his friends were commissioned by Jesus to go into all world to make disciples and tell the stories of Jesus. So they went. This was the first time in Europe, a hugely significant moment for the story of the gospel. They were looking to find and create opportunities for telling people about Jesus so that others could believe. We have a choice as Church; we have to choose to be outward-looking. I've seen these two little cartoons of Church: the first is like a fortress and the Christians are inside, behind a high wall and settled because no-one can get in to touch them or spoil their life and faith and I can understand why people find that an attractive idea; we live in a culture that is outwardly antagonistic to the Christian faith, to Christians and to the Church and it is an understandable desire to hide behind a high wall and stay safe. The second has fuzzy boundaries; it is a church which knows what we believe, but the boundaries are fuzzy, indistinct, a church where people come and go. They find church a place where they're made to feel at home and can encounter God and learn about important things, an outward-looking church. The challenge for the Church is for us always to be outward-looking, ready to engage with people around about us, ready to tell others the stories of Jesus.

2. We see a flexible Church: do you remember the adverts for the first credit card, what was it called? Access? “Your flexible friend!” Flexible is not the first word that springs to mind when you want a word to describe Church, but look at Paul: he had a plan A – find and visit the local synagogue and preach a powerful sermon to persuade them; but there

is no synagogue, so plan A can't work. What to do now? "Well, Philippi is not ready for the gospel; until there is a synagogue, we can't do mission!" It has been suggested that his vision might have given Paul the expectation that he would be greeted by crowds of people, glad to welcome him to their city, because he was here to help; so he might be disappointed when there is not even a synagogue and there seemed no doors to open! Thankfully, Paul was flexible: Plan B - "where can we find people to talk to? Where do people meet to talk about important things?" Down by the river on Saturday morning! So Paul went there and found these women (even that, in its culture is a significant thing!) and talked to them about Jesus. Churches are notorious for having one way of doing things; one strategy; one kind of meeting; one approach to life, the world, God, the universe and the gospel. When that approach doesn't work, there is no plan B! I've met a few congregations in the city where people are stuck: the world, the city, their community around them is changing, has changed and their plan A Church strategy, which worked for them and their generation, isn't working anymore and they don't know what to do; there is no Plan B. We need to be a Church that is flexible; are we people open to where God would lead them?

3. We see a woman with a new outlook on life: Lydia, whose heart and mind were opened to the Christian faith, who publicly professed her allegiance to Jesus in her baptism and her allegiance to the Church by giving Paul and his friends a place to stay – here is evidence of a whole new outlook on life. Faith does that for us: it helps us to see life in a quite different way. It doesn't take away the problems and issues – we still ask "why does it always rain on me?" – but faith puts these questions into a different perspective, that God helps us, loves us, supports us, forgives us. Faith challenges us to put into practice what we believe and become the kind of people that Jesus wants us to be; faith challenges us to have that faith as part of everyday life rather than just something for Sunday! Lydia had a whole new outlook on life because her heart was opened to Jesus and Christian faith.

4. We see God at work building His Church: "*the Lord...*" (*Acts 16:14*) It was Paul who told the stories of Jesus; it was Lydia who made up her mind to believe; somewhere in that mix, God is at work! If you believe all that you hear, God would seem to be demolishing His Church in Scotland in 2013. Yet we are still telling the stories of Jesus; people are still making up their minds to believe in Jesus and embrace Christian faith and try to live out that faith. Somewhere in all of this, God is still at work building His Church. God guided Paul and his friends to Philippi: the closed doors, the dreams and visions, God leading Paul to Philippi; God opened Lydia's heart; God at work in us, inspiring us to believe, opening doors for faith and for Christian service; we respond with faith, obeying the promptings of the Spirit to serve Jesus and serve others. God is at work building His Church.

It is good to have this place where we can think about important things; it is good to take time week by week to think about life's big questions. We should do it more and in other places, at other times. It is so easy to go through life not thinking about questions of faith and life and God and Jesus; it is much better for us to make time to think about these questions. We've seen a church that is outward-looking and flexible; we've seen someone with a new outlook on life; we've seen God at work building His Church. Here is the challenge: for this to be us, our situation: to be an outward-looking, flexible church, to be people whose outlook on life is shaped by Christian faith, to see God at work in us, our Church, our world – and to rejoice!