

Influencers - Lydia

I don't know how many of you are fans of the Sherlock Holmes books by Arthur Conan Doyle or the recent BBC TV series starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman as the famous detective and his sidekick Dr Watson. Whether you are a fan or not I am sure most of you will be familiar with the characters but I wonder how many of you are familiar with the character of Stamford – he only appears in one chapter of one book and has small appearances in two episodes of the TV series but is one of the most influential characters in both – the reason, it is Stamford who introduces John Watson and Sherlock Holmes to each other in the first chapter in the first novel *A Study in Scarlet*. He is never seen again but his action results in the forming of one of the most famous fictional partnerships of all time.

We continue our series on Influencers from the bible, by looking at a character who only appears in one chapter of one book of the Bible but has a big influence both on the early church but also on the modern church. Our influencer today is Lydia.

Lydia only appears in Acts 16 but what a time to appear! This is a pivotal moment in the Bible, although Paul wouldn't have known why at the time, but this is the first time that the gospel has come to what is modern day Europe. At the time it would have just been another part of the Roman empire but we can trace the coming of Christianity to Britain and many other parts of Europe back to the point we read about today, when Paul came to Philippi. Now Paul and his fellow apostles had not intended to come to Europe. For this, their second missionary journey, they had intended to go to Asia, but the spirit prevented them from doing so and instead Paul saw a vision of a man calling him to Macedonia, which he decided meant that they were being called to mission in this area so he sets off immediately for Macedonia. Notice the importance of the word immediately in that sentence. He didn't wait around or do what he wanted to do first. As soon as he felt he was being called to do something by God he up sticks and heads for where he is being called to go. This is a great example for us today, where we can be tempted to put off things that we know God wants us to do until it is convenient for us. If God calls us to do something we should do it when he wants us to – now when we want to.

So Paul heads for Macedonia and ends up in Philippi, the largest city in the district of Macedonia where they landed. It is here that we are introduced to Lydia. Usually, when he arrived in a new city Paul would have gone to the local synagogue. 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 Paul instead goes outside of the city to an area where he has been told that people meet to pray together. There they find a group of women and join them to pray and worship. One of the women is 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 the market place. Purple cloth was seen as a sign of nobility or royalty and was expensive due to the dyes used to make it so she would probably have been reasonably wealthy. 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.

Paul shares with the group the good news of the gospel message. As Paul talked to this little group and told them about Jesus, how he was the fulfilment of God's Old Testament promises of a messiah, the Spirit of God was at work in Lydia: something inside her made sense of all of this. She believes what Paul is telling her and comes to know Jesus and she becomes a Christian: "the Lord..." (Acts 16:14). God was at work in that Prayer group in Philippi, bringing Lydia and we don't know how many others of the group to Christ and the good news of the Gospel.

So how does Lydia and her conversion influence us today. Firstly it shows us that to hear what God tells us, we have to be ready to listen. Verse 14 tells us that Lydia listened to what Paul was telling her. She wasn't just going through the motions, she had a desire to hear what Paul had to say. The Greek word used in this verse and translated as listening indicates an ongoing process. So this wasn't unique to Paul's teaching, Lydia had been continually listening and growing in her devotion to God, but that day Paul's message helps her to understand who God is and how He had sent Jesus into the world. Lydia sets an example which challenges us all to live up to – do we come to Church actively listening for what God wants to tell us or does church become a routine that is what we do on a Sunday morning? Do we listen to God's word and ponder it, letting the spirit within us shape our response or are we already thinking about what we need to do for Sunday lunch? God wants to speak to us and does speak to us, through his word, through those who teach his word, through our prayers – but if we aren't open to hearing it then what he says to us will fall on deaf ears.

But notice that Paul makes clear that it isn't him who brings Lydia to Christ, again in v14 he says "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message". Paul recognises that he is simply the vessel through which God works – that it is God's power which brings Lydia to her conversion. As the Biblical scholar John Stott notes in his book "The Message of Acts" "Although the message was Paul's, the saving initiative was God's. Paul's preaching was not effective in itself the Lord worked through it." God works through many people, whether they be great teachers like Paul, business women like Lydia or someone like you or I. God can use any of us, but any good that comes from it should be recognised as coming from God, rather than from our own efforts.

And how does Lydia react to the good news that she has heard. She wanted to share the good news and help other people come to know the good fortune of a relationship with God. Firstly she was baptised, along with members of her household, making a public profession of faith; secondly, she put her new found faith into action by offering Paul and his friends a place to stay for their time in Philippi so that others could hear their ministry! Lydia recognises that something good has happened and wants to share that with everyone – showing everyone that she has become a Christian through her baptism and then showing what that means by inviting Paul and his brothers to stay with her. This was likely more than just offering them somewhere to sleep – it is likely that Lydia's home became a meeting place for Christians in Philippi – certainly the only other time Lydia is mentioned is in verse 40 of chapter 16 where Paul and Silas meet with the church at Lydia's house – so it may well be that Lydia's house became the first church in Europe!

Lydia sets an example for all of us of how Christ calls us to respond to the Gospel message. He is at work in all our hearts through his spirit and when we open our hearts to him and respond to the good news of his Gospel message, we want to commit ourselves to God and live out his message as Lydia did.

Lydia was the first convert to Christianity in modern Europe so we can trace the growth of Christianity within Europe, within the UK and within Scotland back to her – that in itself should be enough to include her as an influential figure in the Bible. However, her conversion and her response to it provide some important examples that influenced the early church but can also continue to influence us today.

Firstly, her conversion demonstrates to us the importance of actively listening to what God is telling us. We can do this by taking time to read his word, to understand it whether in Church, in bible study groups or personal reflections and by taking time in conversation with God through prayer.

It also highlights the importance of recognising the power of God at work. Whilst Lydia was converted by listening to Paul's message we are told that this was only possible because God "opened her heart

to respond". God can do amazing things through any of us – but it is important to recognise that it is God's power at work and not our own.

Finally, Lydia sets an example for us to follow in how to respond to coming to Christ. In John's gospel chapter 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus, a Pharisee or Jewish leader that "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." When we come to Christ we are in effect reborn, our old life ends and a new life begins and because of that it requires a response – not because we need to do anything to earn God's grace but because as Christians we should naturally want to and Lydia shows this in her response – first publicly proclaiming her faith through her baptism and then putting it into action by opening her home to Paul and the Christian Church.

Like Stamford in Sherlock Holmes, Lydia appears briefly in the bible story, in one chapter, and isn't mentioned again but in that short appearance she has an impact that is felt in the Christian church right up to the current day and sets an example to us all of how to respond to coming to Christ.