

Sermon from Acts 16:9-15, John 14:23-29 – May 22, 2022

Have you ever had plans for travel that have been totally messed up? I'm sure you all have known the frustration of having fog at some airport or other (pretty common in the last few weeks, hasn't it?). We often have to think of creative ways to get to the West Coast when snow has closed the passes or heavy rain has caused slips. That is more common in recent times too, with climate change. I'm sure too, that most of you have had travel plans cancelled during the last two years of our Covid-19 pandemic, of either yourselves, or family overseas. It has all been frustrating for many and hard to bear for others.

We seem to call extreme weather events Acts of God – insurance companies like that term, don't they? It always seems highly unfair to blame these events on God, as they all seem to be extreme, nasty events causing grief and great damage, not some brilliant burst of sunshine that might give us extra delight. One of our readings today contains an Act of God with a difference, as we shall see.

The Book of the Acts of the Disciples is rather like a travel log though, isn't it? The apostle Paul and his companions went here and there, and if we look at the map of Paul's journeys in the back of our bibles, the lines of his journeys look like spider webs...crossing and recrossing parts of southern Europe and around the Mediterranean, sometimes more than once.

Perhaps though, it's more than a fusty old travel log – it's not just about Paul and his mates, and where he decided to go; it's not just about how the Holy Spirit led men and women in the early church; it's about how God changes things and it's about how God's Spirit still leads and enables people today. The Book of Acts is a story that still continues today...it connects with our story...it connects with how God is still at work in the world...and about how God is still calling us to listen. Just as Paul's plans were changed and reformed by dreams and the work of the Holy Spirit, God calls us to listen for that small voice of the Holy Spirit at every turn. And in our increasingly noisy, clamouring world, where we are beset at all sides with demands for our attention, it's not that easy.

Our readings today rather put the cart before the horse – in our Gospel which we read second, we read of Jesus' farewell to his disciples and while he tells them he is to leave them, he also tells them he will not leave them alone – he

will not leave them as orphans. He will send them the Holy Spirit to be their comfort and their guide as they go into the world and proclaim the Gospel. In v27 we read those comforting affirming words “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” This is a kind of backpack verse, where we hold on to it, store it up in our hearts, and bring it out when we are in need. Rather like the verses the vibrant young people from YWAM last week held on to which gave them immense strength in their ministries.

In our reading from Acts, the Spirit is already present, playing a life-changing role...perhaps the readings need to be reversed in our order of reading....

In Acts, we get a real example of how the Spirit disrupts and influences lives. Paul has been authorised by the church in Jerusalem to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, but everywhere it just doesn't work out as he plans. We are told that the Holy Spirit blocked Paul's intended journey, I'm going to read from v6, before our reading begins today....personally I think the reading should begin here anyway....(read from bible)

Interestingly, In v 10, the narrative changes from the personal pronoun 'they' to 'we' and 'us'. Who are the 'we'? We know that this part of Acts covers Paul's journeys. Silas is present, and we read in the beginning of Chapter 16, they decide to take Timothy. Luke is mostly supposed to be the author of Acts, so I imagine he is there too. Quite a band of disciples together.

We read that the Holy Spirit wouldn't allow Paul and his companions to preach in the region of Phrygia and Galatia, and blocked them from preaching in Asia Minor or Bithynia as it was called. That was an unexpected change of travel plans.

Sometimes God does that though, doesn't he? Changes our plans, changes what we desire, closes a door, opens another, blocks us from going in a particular direction. Many of us I'm sure, have experienced this, and sometimes it's hard to understand. Sometimes God tells us 'no' perhaps so we can say 'yes' to something else.

Sometimes we have to push our boat into the water, and trust that God's hand is on the tiller. Just as Jesus tells the disciples in our Gospel reading, not to be afraid; he will not leave them on their own, we understand that God is with us

every step of the way. At times the call of God comes when the Spirit blocks us from going in a certain direction...and that is how it is with Paul.

At this stage Paul is in Troas, in what is today, Western Turkey. He has a vision – he sees a man from Macedonia (northern Greece today), who begs him to ‘come over and help us.’ This ‘over’ is no easy journey, right across the Aegean Sea. Paul heeded the call in v10 ‘concluding that God had called them to preach the gospel to them’. They make their way to Philippi, across the sea from Turkey, to the present-day Balkans.

Philippi was actually a Roman colony. Paul had always spoken in synagogues, where at least people had heard of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But in Philippi there were no synagogues. Where to go? This journey that had begun in uncertainty looked to be continuing in that way.

On the Sabbath they finally decide to go outside the gate of the city to the river, where they felt there might be a place of prayer. Here they meet a group of women, and are welcomed. Paul sits and talks to them. That in itself is quite extraordinary...in this day, it was a breach of religious tradition...men did not speak to women who were unknown to them...it parallels Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman. It is the marvellous work of the Holy Spirit, and in such a delightfully culturally inappropriate way!

Among the women is one called Lydia. She is originally from the city of Thyatira in Asia Minor. It is extraordinary, a woman, and one from Asia Minor (or Turkey), where Paul had come from, becomes Paul’s first convert in Europe. That Spirit!!!

Lets look at Lydia, for it is quite an incredible story. We are told simply that she is ‘a dealer in purple cloth’ v14. There does not seem to be a man in the household...she is obviously the head of the household and the owner of the business. Lydia was born and raised in an industrial dye ghetto in Thyatira...originally the dye to make purple cloth was made from a painstaking process using a particular shellfish, and it made the cloth very expensive. The only people who were able to afford this purple cloth were the wealthy elite or royalty. But artisans from Lydia’s hometown discovered how to make a purple dye from the root of common shrubs, called madder. The cloth became cheaper and was much in demand. Lydia was part of this industry. She may well have been originally very poor, and maybe she moved over the Aegean Sea to Philippi with her skills in order to sell to a bigger market. In any case, she

prospered as an independent woman, and became an influential one, later able to decide for herself and her household to be baptised.

Lydia obviously knew and was 'a worshipper of God' v14. There were many in these areas who appreciated and worshipped the God proclaimed by the Hebrews, but they did not make the formal step of becoming a part of the Jewish religion. She listened intently to Paul, and as we read 'the Lord opened her heart.' Due to God's grace alone, Lydia and her whole household believed and were baptised.

And so we see in this story the theme of openness to the workings of the Holy Spirit: a new geographical direction was opened to Paul, and in turn the Spirit opened Lydia's heart to the Gospel proclamation. Lydia went from being a worshipper of God as proclaimed by the Jews, to being a disciple of Jesus. The Good News of Jesus was welcomed by this extraordinary woman and her community.

This is a story of amazing grace...from beginning to end God sets the pace. God sets the direction, and God determines the results.

But wait, there's more! Immediately after her baptism, Lydia wanted to do something...she 'prevailed' upon the disciples to come to her home and accept her hospitality 'if you consider me to be a believer of the Lord, then come and stay in my house'.

It gives us food for thought. I wonder how our own practices of hospitality that are so much a part of our lives (or were before Covid!), helps us extend God's kingdom to others. The practice of sharing a cuppa or a meal, breaks down divisions and barriers and enables us to get to know others better. I think Ruth and Josh's endeavours with young people using the power of love, and the Gospel, together with hospitality, are a great initiative, and go back to the heart of the early church.

We are now near the end of the Easter season, but we continue to be reminded that the Spirit of the risen Lord continues to welcome people into the kingdom. God welcome us into his loving and welcoming arms, and we in turn welcome others in the name of Jesus, all disciples together.

When Lydia opened her heart and her home to the gospel, and ministered to Paul and his companions, it was the beginnings of what would become a great

church. Later Paul will write a letter to this church while in prison...a letter to the Philippians; and we will learn of a thriving congregation full of joy and hope, standing strong, and continuing to support Paul and the spreading of the Gospel. Disciples together.

The fact that Paul heeded a dream, crossed over into Macedonia and taught a group of women, praying by a river, the Good News about Christ, led to the conversion of the European continent and was the beginning of a civilisation that would be in many ways shaped by the values of the Christian faith. Who would have thought that it was possible that a change in travel plans had the power to change the course of history?

When we are open to the leading of God's spirit, amazing things can happen through the power of God's grace. God's spirit is with us every step of the way, leading us, and guiding us into some surprising but fruitful paths. We give thanks and pray a blessing on the work of Ruth and Josh, and also the young folk from YWAM in their ministries. The Spirit opens our hearts to that power of God's grace and salvation. The Spirit leads us home.

Let us pray: Ever-guiding Spirit, open us to the paths you call us to travel together. Open us to the ones with whom you would have us minister. May we welcome one another with hearts of grace, that together we may be hospitable to your purposes. Amen.