

**22<sup>nd</sup> May 2022**  
**Acts 16.9-16**

## **Lydia's Story of Faith**

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In his autobiography former President, Bill Clinton writes:

I learned a lot from the stories my uncle, aunts, and grandparents told me: that no one is perfect but most people are good; that people can't be judged only by their worst or weakest moments; that harsh judgements can make hypocrites of us all; that a lot of life is just showing up and hanging on; that laughter is often the best, and sometimes the only, response to pain. Perhaps most important, I learned that everyone has a story – of dreams and nightmares, hopes and heartache, love and loss, courage and fear, sacrifice and selfishness. All my life I've been interested in other people's stories.

Of course, all of us have a story. My grandfather, in his retirement days, read a book a week from his local library. Every Tuesday he'd return one and check out another and my grandmother used to get so frustrated with him because every book, every week was a biography. 'That's all he ever reads', she used to say, 'other people's stories' – well why not!

During these weeks of the Easter season the lectionary has been taking us on a journey of stories. The story of people becoming the friends, disciples and followers of the Risen Christ. These are stories of encounter, hope and transformation.

Today in Acts 16 we meet a lady who is sometimes described as the very first European convert, Lydia of Thyatira.

We come across Lydia at a Prayer Meeting.

Paul has had a vision urging him to travel further west into Macedonia. This region was the birthplace of that empire builder Alexander the Great, and this leading city of Philippi – the location of Lydia's Prayer Meeting, was named after Philip, Alexander's father.

There is, I think, something exciting about this city. It's a Roman colony, a place of trade being near the sea port of Neapolis, it had a Jewish community – hence the Sabbath gathering of prayer by the riverside and soon it would be home to a new church – which, according to the New Testament letter we call Philipians, it

was a church, and this wasn't always the case, that Paul was deeply thankful for.

So, by the river Lydia and some other women gather together to pray. Maybe there were insufficient worshippers to form a Synagogue – we don't know. We just piece together the jigsaw puzzle and what emerges is a picture of quiet faith, supportive prayer and an openness of spirit.

Verse 13 says: On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate by the riverside where we thought there would be a place of prayer; we sat down and talked to the women who had gathered there.

There is a gentleness about Paul at Philippi which is intriguing. This isn't the strident preacher but the courteous rabbi sitting down by the riverbank one Sabbath and talking – simply talking - about faith with the women who had come to pray.

Prayer was part of Lydia's story.

I'm always heartened when people say 'Thank you for your prayers'. We may not always find it easy to pray and, of course, there isn't just one way of praying.

Perhaps at its most basic prayer is about being open to God. When we pray there's no need to wear a mask or put on a brave face. We come to God as we are. It's like coming home and being embraced by love. In prayer, as we reflect, think, speak or linger in silence, we acknowledge and cherish that we are not alone. God is with us and love holds us.

Prayer – it was part of Lydia's story.

And so was work. Prayer and work are not mutually exclusive.

In a day when the story of women's contribution to society often went shamefully unrecorded there's a sense of real value given to Lydia as Luke describes her as a seller of purple cloth. Perhaps she was the Deborah Meadon, from Dragon's Den, of her day – a businesswoman – someone whose trade was about harvesting the expensive dye from shellfish and then making beautiful clothes with her purple style signature. And she was rich, or at least well off enough to be described as a householder. No doubt, she did well because purple was deemed to be an expensive colour, worn, for example, by the high priest in the temple.

As Luke describes her so we get a fuller picture of her life – something of the whole person and that connection between the life of prayer and the life of work.

Maybe this reference to Lydia's occupation reminds you, perhaps frustratingly, of

that initial question people might ask us: *Oh, what do you do?*

Well, as this story is over 2000 years old it's clear that such a question has been around for a long time.

Sometimes we might feel our job defines us, at other times we might want to cry out that we're more than our job. And, of course, retirement brings a whole set of new questions about self-identity and definition.

All we are noticing this morning is that the Bible is keen to bring the whole of life together as it describes the story of people. We are the sum of many different parts, and one of them will probably include our occupation.

We're told the Celtic Christians who lived and worshipped on these islands long before the missionaries from Rome arrived always saw prayer and work as an indistinguishable whole, they were never keen on what they saw as a false dichotomy of sacred and secular. So, prayers were said as cows were milked and wood chopped, just as much as on a Sunday in church.

And prayer and work were part of Lydia's story.

Baptism became the next chapter of her biography. Lydia joins that small New Testament group whose baptisms were recorded; these new disciples included Paul, the Philippian Jailer and the Ethiopian Finance Minister.

These baptisms were all signs of an inner faith. Verse 14 describes the spiritual stirrings of the heart Lydia was going through: she was a worshipper of God and the Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul had said. She was baptised...

There are times in life when words by themselves seem inadequate, so we mix them with symbols to heighten the moment. At a wedding, for example, we exchange rings.

A few weeks ago, at Great Sacred Music in St Martin in the Fields I bumped into Diana, the previous Vicar of St Michael's and a good friend of many of us here at AFC. I was visiting it as part of meeting up with an old college friend, so it all became quite a reunion. Well, you might recall that for her Sabbatical Diana and her husband did part of that special walk, a pilgrimage to Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain. One of my Baptist colleagues is just about to do the same for his Sabbatical this autumn, I met up with him this week and he was

telling me all about his plans. And this walk, this pilgrimage was made especially famous by that film starring Martin Sheen called *The Way*, in which four, in one sense, highly incompatible and unlikely pilgrims walk the Way to the Cathedral.

At the end of their walk the Dutch pilgrim from the group – a weed smoking pilgrim with little religious background – is so overcome by his experience that quietly, whilst no one is watching, he sinks to his knees in the Cathedral before the statue of St James. There was something deeply moving and powerful in that scene. Falling on one's knees doesn't sound a big deal, yet we were left in no doubt that for Joost, this overweight Dutchman, it kind of meant everything.

In our sophisticated day and age of anonymous digital technology and fast communication I believe the signs, sacraments and symbols of our faith remain an invaluable gift to us. When we bow our heads in prayer, receive bread and wine, sit quietly before the cross in church or bring our children or ourselves for baptism – are we not in some small way saying with Lydia: *the Lord has opened my heart*.

And finally this morning I just note that hospitality was part of her story.

Straightaway she welcomed Paul into her home.

She seems to instinctively connect faith with community. So, after her baptism what is more natural than to share hospitality with Paul; to be welcoming, generous and encouraging.

Working at hospitality is a long term but priority project for every congregation. And, of course, it's more than just food. It's about the depth of our welcome, the consistency of our friendship, the faithfulness of our prayers and our willingness to travel alongside each other in grace even on rocky roads.

These are the characteristics we need if we want to continue living out the ideal of being a 'Community for the Community'.

Today we have met up with Lydia, the seller of purple cloth and shared some of her story – a story of prayer, work, baptism and hospitality.

We all have a story. And may we sense God at work in ours – in the name of The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit. Amen.