

**Gathered at the river**

*Acts 16:9-15; John 14:23-29*

One of the delights of the weeks after Easter is to meander through the Book of Acts on Sunday, and follow in the footsteps of those people who were alive at the very beginning of the Christian Church and hear their stories and trace how the faith we hold today was shaped and formed and spread.

Last week – the big picture story of making the decision that God’s good news could go out into all the world and embrace all people, Jewish and non-Jewish. This week – we begin to see what that was going to look like, and how it was done.

There are some people who look at the spread of Christianity in the C1st AD and see nothing more than historical coincidence. Judaism was reforming and dividing. The Roman Empire’s roads enabled Christians to travel all over the known world. The Jewish Rebellion in 66AD and the collapse of Jerusalem forced Jews and Christians alike away from Palestine and across Asia Minor and Northern Africa and Europe. George Macleod, the Church of Scotland minister who founded the Iona Community in the 1930s is attributed to the saying, “If you think that’s a coincidence, I hope you have a very dull life!”

Paul sets out on his missionary journey, crossing Asia Minor. Did he have a plan, or was he going where he could with his message about Jesus. In the night, he has a dream. A Macedonian, a man from northern Greece, appears in the vision and asks to hear the gospel of Jesus. Paul and his companions go. It seems a small thing, inconsequential, but it is the first recorded time Christianity crosses into Europe.

Imagine if this had not happened; if Christianity had remained a merely middle-eastern religion? The great glories of western Christianity, its art and music and architecture and literature, its influence on social and civic life – none of that would have happened.

But it did, because Paul and others adventured over, and come to Philippi and go outside the city gate and down to the river, where they had hoped they might find a place of prayer. And

there the missionaries meet with some women, and the Christian mission to Europe won its first convert, Lydia. It almost did not happen, this chance meeting with the wealthy businesswoman and the missionaries. Paul and Lydia and the Holy Spirit all work together in this event, this 'chance' gathering by the river.<sup>1</sup>

Gathering by a river, perhaps reminding us of the Psalm that talks of the Jews of old by the river of Babylon wondering how they will sing the Lord's song in a strange land. By the river, on the missionary frontier, not in synagogue or house or temple, but by a river, with women, the gospel of Jesus is first chattered about in Europe. By the river, where that unusual woman Lydia, a seller of purple goods, a business woman, wealthy, not deriving her significance from a husband but in her own right, hears that spiky, awkward Christian Paul, and found herself drawn into his words of good news. Perhaps Lydia had come to the river for a time of secluded prayer away from her business and household. Perhaps she expected to meet other woman, Jewish worshippers of Gentile seekers, for prayer. Perhaps she came regularly. There, gathering by the river, Lydia found the God Who was finding her.

On this Sabbath, Paul went looking for the place of prayer outside the city gate. On this cultural frontier the only audience he found that day was outside the gate and so, outside the establishment, outside what was comfortable, or proper, the good news of Jesus was chattered to women by men of no status. No great sermons; just conversation; as the good news of Jesus was related to those who would listen. And as Lydia listened, God opened her heart. She was baptised, by the river, and her household, and then she opened her home to the missionaries, so that the good news of Jesus could be spread further.

Hannah Mary Goodlad, the current Moderator of the Youth Assembly, has talked about a spiritual hunger amongst the people of Scotland, young and old. People looking for a word, a message, an idea, a philosophy, an acceptance, an encouragement that will help them through life. Not all might come to the Christian faith, but some might, if we share with them, if we show them what kind of difference it has made to us.

I convened a meeting of General Assembly people last week, and in the space of an hour heard stories of hope, stories of work being done that is changing lives for the good, stories of concern, stories of engagement. A journalist from the BBC, now working for the Church, said to me afterwards, “I had no idea, I had no idea. There is so MUCH going on.”

I look at our intimations today: the hospitals and home visits; the good neighbours; the loose change offering every week helping a charity in India, a clothing charity in Edinburgh, a cancer hospice up the road; a food bank; a coffee morning providing friendship and welcome; a baby and toddler group providing a safe place and understanding; a nursing home service including some frail elderly people in worship; events supporting Christian Aid, who believe in life before death; the Verandah tearoom providing friendship to vulnerable people and their families; good grief, even a Kirk Session where men and women talk about how we care and how we communicate and how we shape the very fabric of this building so that, well, so that we, today, can still share the good news of Jesus.

We are between two little rivers – the Jordan to our north, and the Braid Burn to our south – we too gather by the rivers – even though we do not see them – and provide a quiet place for prayer, a gathering place for those seeking comfort, an open place for those questing after truth, a working place for those wanting to do something about what they believe because for them words are not enough.

How do we identify the places where people are waiting to hear the word? How do we provide places where people can come and hear the word? How can we create places wide enough, inclusive enough, welcoming enough, where people might gather and find themselves being found by God?

Gathering by the river, the story of Lydia is one of those decisive stories in the Bible that I suspect most of us will not have noticed for a long time, if at all. Lydia is decisive because she is discerning. She is discerning because having come to look, God opened her heart to a new level of perception. She comes to worship because she is hunger for something more in life, something beyond the commercial success she has achieved through selling her purple goods.

She is hungering for more because that restless Spirit, who is surely in us all before we ever know it, has stirred up something like a holy longing in her soul. Every step of the way, the Spirit prompts and calls and blesses. Because she responded, the first recorded Christian in Europe, we are blessed through her.<sup>ii</sup>

Where will you gather in the week ahead? What rivers are there in your lives that will carry you to homes, and workplaces, and shops, and railways, and airports, and cafes and restaurants, and cinemas, and theatres, and halls, and meetings? Might it be that through your words, or your actions, some seeking soul will hear or see God's good news, because of you, and find some of the answers, and some of the further questions, that will transform their lives.

The Spirit of God, like a flowing river, runs through history, and where people gather, brings to them words and songs and images and actions that help them on their way, and maybe towards God. Paul played his part. Lydia played her part. Now we must play our part, today.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Ronald Cole Turner, *Feasting on the Word Year C, Volume 2*, p476

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid* p478