

Reflection for Easter 6 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Late spring is a wonderful and beautiful time of year: the leaves are green and fresh, the swifts are back in Keith, and we hope they will start to use the nesting boxes at Holy Trinity, folk are out in their gardens taking advantage of the fine weather and doing some gardening, maybe planting out bedding and other plants that they have either purchased from the garden centre or grown from seeds on the kitchen windowsill or in the green house.

I will always remember my grandfather, who was a great gardener. He would simply put a stick in the ground, and it always seemed to grow. Then he would plant row upon row of carrots and other vegetables just to get three the same for the annual flower and vegetable show. Sadly, I don't seem to have inherited his gardening skills, but what always amazes me is the way a seed, sometimes as small as a speck of dust, can drop into the ground and become a plant of stature and beauty. The wonders of creation - something we are encouraged to reflect on and think about during this Rogation season.

From what seems so small, so insignificant, grows something so large and so beautiful, that it graces the landscape for so many years.

Today's reading from Acts 16 also makes us reflect on the way that something small can grow into something large. Coupled with that, it is also the story of one of the defining moments in history of the church - a turning point after which nothing is quite the same again; but, like so many such moments, only really understood and appreciated with hindsight.

As the chapter opens, Paul and his companions are seeking to discern the next step they should take on their mission to spread the gospel. It's a section which shows how St Paul's journeys are a combination of strategic planning and at the same time sensitive to the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit. For whatever reason, the province of Asia with places like Ephesus are closed to them; Acts puts it like this *"the Holy Spirit did not let them preach the message in the province of Asia"*

This struggle faced by Paul and his companions is a reminder to us of the way God has a path for each of us which may well take us in directions we are already considering or feel instinctively to be natural. At times, though, God closes one door only then to open another, maybe in directions we would not have considered. I would put my time in Canada in that category. It was not a place I would ever have considered ministering in until it suddenly opened up before me. I am sure that for Paul the great city of Ephesus would have held a great attraction; but no, the time was not right, other work needed to be done first.

The door to the next step of Paul's journey is opened by the vision of a man from Macedonia saying *"Come over to Macedonia and help us!"* Many of the commentators writing on this passage have suggested that Paul may have met Luke in Troas, perhaps for medical reasons, Luke being a doctor and during conversation he urged Paul to go to Macedonia. However it happened, Paul responds to God's promptings and makes the short yet important crossing from Troas to Neapolis. With that crossing, not only did the gospel message move west, it also for the first time came to Europe; that short journey being one of the turning points of Christian history.

The first city Paul and his companions make their way to is Philippi - a city which held a special status, being designated a Roman colony. As Paul arrives things do not look

encouraging; he looks for the local synagogue, as was his custom, so that he could begin his teaching with those of a Jewish background, but there is no synagogue. To form a Jewish Synagogue, you must have a least 10 male heads of household and in Philippi the Jewish community was smaller than that, so he sets out along the river to see if he can find a place of prayer. Sure enough he does find a small group, mostly of women, lead by a Lydia, a dyer of purple cloth, a women of some social standing described as a “worshiper of God”, indicating that she was not a Jew by birth but had received some instruction in Judaism, possibly before coming to live in Philippi. This small group of folk by the riverside is where Paul’s seed would be planted and grow eventually into the western church. As with Jesus’ disciples, hardly the best raw material with which to convert a pagan city!

Here we are reminded not to look at things negatively or in human terms but rather from God’s perspective. Seeing that group, Paul could have walked away, but he stays and, in some ways, the church he came to love most was born. Just because something does not look promising does not mean God cannot use it.

The result in this case is that Lydia, on hearing Paul, goes from being interested, to eager listener, and on to commitment. The first person that we know of who committed themselves to Christ in Europe is a woman; and it’s a commitment that is manifest in two ways. Firstly, not only she but also her whole household is baptised. Secondly, she opens her home to Paul and his companions - her home becomes the base the base from which Paul can move the mission forward.

By being open to the calling, the prompting of God, not only does a new path open up in Paul’s mission to spread the gospel, but also the resources and accommodated are provided by Lydia, whose commitment is seen in a very practical way.

Three things stand out to me from this passage.

1. Firstly, our plans for church growth and development do need to be thought through in a strategic way but they also need to be open to allowing God, through his Spirit, to shape, mould and change them.
2. The that the direction God sometimes points us in, maybe even pushes us, is not always the one that we may want to go or seems the most fruitful, but it is just these situations that God can and does use to open new paths.
3. That commitment to God is not just about saying yes. It is not just about us; it is also about being open to allowing ourselves to be used as the next step of God’s plan to grow his Kingdom - placing not only ourselves but also our resources at his disposal which, maybe more than anything else, can be difficult in our modern western world. What Lydia did was open her home and her material resources to Paul and his companions. They had the message - she provided the platform from which to take that message further.

“Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ... being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them, we set sail from Troas ... and to Philippi. ...

A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to Paul and his companions. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.”