

Lydia **Sermon on Acts 16: 9-15**

As one of the texts for this Sunday the Methodist lectionary suggests to us Lydia's story from the Book of Acts.

Acts is a theological book (Luke is regarded as the author) that reports the beginning of the Christian church and the work of the first missionaries. And just before Acts begins, Jesus' disciples are paralysed with fear, self-doubt and personal shame. They had not only failed to prevent Jesus' suffering and death, they had even denied him, betrayed him and left him alone when it had come to the darkest moments of his life.

They were afraid that what had happened to him could happen to them as well. His cruel death could easily be followed by the killing of his disciples. So they'd all hidden in an upstairs room to allow time to go by and help them be forgotten...

However, when it comes to the 2nd chapter of Acts, those men who abandoned Jesus at Gethsemane, have become courageous preachers of the "mighty acts of God".

Acts is an important book for us – even though many of us don't know as much about it as we tend to know about the gospels... It is an important book for us, because it confirms that the power of the spirit which transformed the disciples' lives while Jesus was still with them, could transform their lives after his death, too. The power of the Holy Spirit has been changing people's lives ever since...

Remember, when in Acts 3 Peter discovers his ability to heal... when in Acts 9 he raises Tabitha from the dead, or in chapter 11 he is challenged by this vision that eventually sends him out not only to the Jews but to all people and show them God's ways that lead to life?!

Several churches had already been started. Homes had been opened as meeting places for those who followed the new movement. There was a church in Tabitha's home town Joppa. Mary and Rhoda had invited people to prayer meetings at their house in Jerusalem. The first Jewish-Gentile church had been started in Antioch. With amazing care they provided material and spiritual support to the new believers who'd been scattered all over the place by the persecution of the young Christian church earlier on.

Saul had become Paul. He'd stopped persecuting the Christians and started spreading the good news of Jesus himself.

Now being a follower of Jesus, too, Paul had this vision. He was called over to Macedonia. And he did not only hear that call, but he followed it.

That is one of the important points in this story...

They set sail straight away and arrived in Philippi, something like the capital of the district of Macedonia. There they stayed for a few days; and on the Sabbath they went out and sought other worshippers.

What Paul and his companions discovered is unique in the New Testament. They met Lydia and some other women. On the Sabbath day they met a well organised group of women in the Roman colony of Philippi. These women met outside the

city in a small prayer house near the river. They met together, they prayed and preached, they sang and praised God, and obviously also welcomed newcomers and strangers. Paul and his friends were warmly welcomed and immediately became part of this small Christian community.

One of the women is mentioned by name. Her leading role is specifically emphasised, and we learn about her profession and her background. We are told where she comes from and how she earns her living.

Lydia, and maybe some of the other women, too, is a business woman. In contrast to what would have been expected in her time and culture, Lydia is a leader at work, in her community and in her household, too.

Lydia sold purple cloth, which in itself was a luxury item for the wealthy, and a beautiful thing to look at. But winning the purple colour from plants and dyeing the fabric with it, was very hard work – a physically demanding and a dirty job. Often several women would join together in one business and employ others. Sometimes they lived and worked together in family-like groups called “houses”. They came from all sorts of backgrounds – men and women – and they had access to the houses of the “beautiful and wealthy”, when they sold their products.

We can easily imagine how this, after Lydia and “her house” were baptised, may have helped Christianity to enter very many different hearts and houses. Under Lydia’s leadership, and with the support of Paul and his friends, who stayed in Lydia’s home for some time, the early church in Philippi became a place for all: women, men, children, rich and poor, no matter what... no matter where from...

Lydia and her community’s greatest contribution to the early church was their hospitality!

And believe me – this was not the most natural thing to do in those days... This was not the most obvious thing to do after all the persecution the young Christian church had already been through.

In one of the most violent pogroms Stephen had died, and people mourned deeply. The tragedy of the first martyr and the scattering of the young Christians throughout the Mediterranean showed people, how dangerous it still was to follow Jesus.

However, God had opened Lydia’s heart, and together with her community she opened her house. That is a second important point of the story. Remember? Paul following his call – and Lydia opening her house – those two together... those two in concert are the beginning of a movement that keeps expanding – however persecuted at times.

Hospitality to strangers, among both Jews and Gentiles in the ancient world, was considered a religious must, a God-given task, a virtue...

In the Greek religion strangers were under the special protection of the gods. And the Jewish tradition recognises something similar, when we think of the passage in Genesis... Here strangers are shown hospitality by Abraham and Sarah. This is surely a background story to what we much later, read in the letter to the Hebrews: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Jews and early Christians, certainly, knew the story of Abraham resting at the entrance of his tent, when three men appeared nearby. He welcomed them, honoured them, rushed off to offer water to wash their feet, especially prepared food, water for humans and animals, rest in the shade, shelter, a place to stay for the night – and a blessing.

Jesus, as an observant Jew, Jesus embodies the virtue of hospitality, particularly in the way he shares food and table fellowship.

Jesus as gracious host feeds over 5000 people on a hillside, and later explains to the crowd that he is the bread of life, living bread from heaven – all they need. He offers “living water”, and is both: host and meal. Just think of the last supper... the famous gesture of hospitality in the meal that we continue to celebrate as the foretaste of God’s most gracious hospitality...

The words about hospitality in Hebrews 13 demand a community that remains open towards strangers.

Something that – let’s be honest – hasn’t always happened throughout the history of the Christian church. And sometimes it was even communion, communion, the last supper that was totally misunderstood in its generous meaning of openness and grace and misused to exclude others...

There are churches that allow only members forward for communion, and I will never forget how awkward it feels to be part of such an act of worship that, when it comes to the heart of it all, selects and excludes the strangers.

This was never meant to be, when the new Testament, the letters of the apostles, the communities around the Pauls and Lydias speak of hospitality!

The Greek word used in the New Testament for hospitality does not only suggest acceptance, openness and care --- it literally speaks of love --- love for the stranger.

And this in a time when Christians lived in constant danger of discrimination and persecution...

The letter to the Hebrews encourages early Roman Christian communities not to barricade their doors to protect themselves, but like Abraham, to go forth and welcome the stranger with open arms... a most vulnerable position which leaves the host completely unguarded.

Abraham took the risk.

So did Lydia and her house.

So did millions of others and helped Christianity to expand.

Our risk in offering hospitality, a space where change can take place, is much lower than it was in Lydia’s time. But do we do it often enough: stretch our hands out, open our arms, let the stranger enter and become a friend?

An open door, a warm welcome, food and drink on the table, shelter, and a blessing... and all these to witness Jesus – nothing more and nothing less?

Could this be Peace Church on a Sunday morning?

When in summer 2005 the Pope-Levison family – Priscilla, Jack, Chloe and Jeremy – moved to Munich to live and work here for half a year, they found Peace Church to be such a place.

They came to church almost every Sunday while they were here. They loved the mix of nationalities, cultures and backgrounds. They admired the way we managed to be the body of Christ overcoming differences and seeking common ground, whenever we meet.

Priscilla joined the women's Bible study, Jeremy fell in love with Kids' Club. Chloe found her way into our teens' group, and Jack cut the turkey at Thanksgiving... Just a month before they left, Priscilla preached. And it was only then that most of the church people realised that they both – Priscilla and Jack – were theology professors.

In one of the books, Priscilla and Jack had published years before they came to Munich, I found the story of a modern Lydia figure. Lydia at the end of the 20th century. Lydia in Kenya in Africa. Lydia opening her house after God's opened her heart.

The story in Priscilla's and Jack's book is told by Hannah Kinoti, a Kenyan theologian.

In the reality of Nairobi 1999 Lydia is called Mrs Mutahi...

Mrs. Mutahi, who lived in the poorer part of Nairobi with her family, had some Friends over for a lunch party. When her guests left, she got busy clearing dishes And throwing the rubbish in the common rubbish bin outside. Later in the evening, she went to throw away some more rubbish and was surprised to find a group of boys hanging on the rubbish bin and picking clean the chicken bones she had thrown away earlier. She invited the boys into the house and gave them the leftovers from the lunch. The boys had no homes to return to, so that night they slept on the floor of the small house. On the following several evenings, the boys kept returning in greater numbers until the house proved too small for them. Her daughter who did some tailoring in the city centre offered to take the boys some bread for lunch at a public park in the city. That worked well, but the boys still turned up at the house in the evenings. The lunches were also sometimes rudely interrupted by civic authorities who dispersed the 'parking boys,' whom they considered a menace. Eventually Mrs. Mutahi proposed to her "family" of street urchins, which by now included girls, that they should all move to the foot of the Ngong hills, on the outskirts of Nairobi, where she and her husband owned a small plot of land. There they could all construct a much bigger house than the present quarters. Some of the children deserted her because they preferred the dazzle of the city centre, but some twenty children moved with her. I visited Ngong Hills Children's Home with a group of women from my church, and the stories this woman told moved us to tears. The children were wonderful and impressed us by their good manners and spiritual awakening.

Is there much to add to this moving story from a country which some of you know much better than I do?

What Mrs Mutahi lived out, are the basic elements of every story of hospitality: welcome, a gesture of honour, time spent with the others, water, food, shelter... a place to stay... And out came a blessing: a blessing for the girls and boys she

cared for, and surely also a blessing for herself – not to show how wonderful Mrs Mutahi is, but to witness Jesus, who is both: the host and the meal.
...all we need when we want to walk in Lydia's footsteps and write our own stories of welcome and hospitality.

Let us ask God to give us ears to hear his voice, and eyes to see his work be done, when we all here in this church start to open our hearts and houses. Let our lives and our community become meeting places of God's people where we can offer them Christ.
Amen.

Prayer

Loving God, you are both for us: the host of our lives, and the food we need.
Be close to us.
Be with us on our life journeys.
Help us to meet people who might wish to meet you.
Help us to trust that we can do as much for you
as Lydia and so many others did.
Help us hear your call and open our hearts and houses.
Help this church to become a place where people touch each others' lives and thus
are touched by you.
Amen.