

## Friday March 26<sup>th</sup>: Lydia: [Acts 16:11-15,40](#) :‘The Lord opened her heart...’

I love Charles Dickens’ wonderful seasonal novella A Christmas Carol and read it every December in the run up to Christmas. The story of the conversion of Scrooge from mean spirited and hard-hearted businessman to generous philanthropist is perhaps the most influential story he ever penned; its publication certainly led to a significant increase in charitable giving. At one point in the story Scrooge is alongside the Ghost of Christmas Past listening to his nephew’s wife play a ‘simple little air’ on the harp and we are told, ‘When this strain of music sounded, all the things the Ghost had shown him, came upon his mind; he softened more and more; and thought that if he could have listened to it often, years ago, he might have cultivated the kindnesses of life for his own happiness with his own hands...’. Now we don’t need to compare Lydia with Ebenezer Scrooge (apart from the fact that they were both wealthy business owners) but just as the beautiful harp playing opens a door in Scrooge’s fictitious heart and leads to a complete change of mind so Paul’s words, through the grace of God, open Lydia’s heart to the good news of Jesus (v 14).



Her spiritual journey had been going on for some time. She is described as a ‘worshipper of God’ (v 14) which means that although she was a Gentile she was sympathetic to the values and beliefs of the Jewish faith without having actually converted to Judaism. What this meant was that, as far as she was concerned, Paul wasn’t starting from scratch. When people become Christians, the interplay between the work of the Holy Spirit and the part played by the new convert is difficult to pin down. Paul makes it clear that Christians

shouldn’t slap themselves on the back for having earned a place among the elect because they made the right response; even the ability to respond to grace is itself a gift of God (Eph 2 v 8). Yet, at the same time, we do need to say ‘yes’ to God. We don’t only do that when we become Christians, of course, as we saw yesterday when considering Ananias - the Christian life involves aligning ourselves with the will of God as a way of life.

What we glean from this riverside encounter is that we would not be able to respond to God’s message and his love if he weren’t at work in our hearts. In ‘A Christmas Carol’ it is the three ghosts who place images of the past, present and future before Scrooge which work on him bit by bit until he becomes a changed man. In Lydia’s case the Holy Spirit, which had already been at work in her heart over a number of years, enables her to see in very sharp focus what had been previously seen from a distance.

It is an encouragement to us that when we share our faith with other people the Holy Spirit will use our words, our lifestyle and our prayers to speak to people’s hearts; from beginning to end, conversion is a gift of God’s grace rather than a human endeavour. I think most of us know this but it worth being reminded from time to time when, for example, we are the only Christian in our workplace, our circle of friends, our class, our WhatsApp or Facebook group or our family, that we are not on our own but that God is with us and, often under the radar, working gracefully through us by the Spirit.

Of course, not everyone will respond positively to the good news. We're told that Lydia, attentively listening, responded to Paul's proclamation of Christ, but we know that there were other women there (v 13) who, it seems, didn't have the same openness. When Paul visited Athens, in spite of him having done his homework and quoting from Greek philosophers to back up his message (Acts 17 v 27-28), the response was not as overwhelming as he might have hoped (although his labours were not entirely fruitless - Acts 17 v 33). Yet such was his faith in the work of the Holy Spirit to change lives that he had to be persuaded to stay with Lydia rather than move on to the next set of encounters that make up the life of an itinerant evangelist (v 15). There's nothing at all wrong with inviting people to an event or course at church to unpack the basics of the Christian faith but it's worth also remembering that such was Jesus' confidence that God had irreversibly changed the lives of those he healed or set free from evil, as often as not, he sent them straight home to share with their loved ones what God had done for them!

On that note, it's interesting that without delay (or going on a preparation course) Lydia is baptised along with her household; the Holy Spirit has touched this family which will never be the same again. When Lydia invites Paul and his colleagues to stay with her, she includes the phrase, 'if you consider me to be a believer in the Lord' (v 15). I wonder if this reflects both humility and excitement at her new found faith. It's clear that by the end of Paul's rather eventful visit to Philippi, Lydia's house was where the local Christian community was meeting (v 40). Even as Paul and Silas were being attacked, stripped, beaten and thrown in prison, the Holy Spirit was growing the church.

Of course, it isn't just in the area of evangelism that the Holy Spirit is at work in us and through us. As a priest working in a parish context, I ministered to people with specific needs on many occasions, including taking weddings and funerals and doing lots of listening to people in pain many of whom who did not subsequently become part of a Christian community. Even though many of those people did not join the church I still believe that God was at work in their lives. Just because the person we have been caring for and praying for doesn't start coming along on a Sunday doesn't mean that we have failed God or not demonstrated enough faith. God is at work in all sorts of ways well beyond the church door and I have encountered sincere faith and praying hearts in many who do not attend church on a regular basis. Of course it is very important indeed for Christians to meet for worship as they did at Lydia's house and as the writer to the Hebrews encourages his readers to do (Heb 10 v 25). But we mustn't place limits on how God works and who he is working in and through.

One very good definition of mission says that it is about finding out what God is doing and joining in. The less assumptions we make about how and where the kingdom is being built the more our eyes will be open to the work of the Spirit who cannot be made to march to our tune. The church is, of course, an integral part of God's activity in the world yet whenever the hungry are fed, people are released from poverty, conflict ceases, medical advances are made, local communities come together to help those in need and people receive a fair price for what they produce God is just as much at work as he was in the heart of Lydia by the river in Philippi.

**Questions:** In what way did the Holy Spirit open your heart to the good news of Jesus? What does 'finding out what God is doing and joining in' mean for you?

**Prayer:** Lord, give us a clearer vision of your Spirit's work in the church and the world and by your grace give us the will to be part of it. Amen.