

You can learn a lot from Lydia

Acts 16.6-15

*Lydia, oh Lydia, say, have you met Lydia?*

*Lydia the tattooed lady*

*She has eyes that men adore so*

*And a torso even more so*

*Lydia, oh Lydia, that encyclopedia*

*Lydia, the queen of tattoo*

*On her back is the Battle of Waterloo*

*Beside it the Wreck of the Hesperus, too*

*And proudly above waves the red, white and blue*

*You can learn a lot from Lydia*

*When her robe is unfurled, she will show you the world*

*If you step up and tell her where*

*For a dime you can see Kankakee or Paree*

*Or Washington crossing the Delaware*

*Lydia, oh Lydia, that encyclopedia*

*Lydia, the queen of them all*

*She once swept an admiral clean off his feet*

*The ships on her hips made his heart skip a beat*

*And now the old boy's in command of the fleet*

*For he went and married Lydia*

Unusual words from Groucho Marx for the start of a sermon! But we need to lead into how Lydia became part of the Christian story. There are days when a verse from the Bible could just as well have come from a headline in the papers. We hear in today's reading from Acts that Paul has a vision of a Greek man begging him to come and help them. What the Greek says is not a vague 'if you have a moment, could you lend us a hand' but a desperate cry for someone to come running. And that is what Paul decides he must do – we will return to what happened what he got there in a minute or two.

Often when we hear our Bible readings we miss out on the context – what has just happened before is significant in making sense of the story we are reading. That is especially true of this reading from Acts. In the previous couple of verses, we hear lots of things which must at the time have seemed a problem to Paul and his companions. Let me read those verses to you now:

“They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.”

Just think about that situation. Paul and Timothy were on a roll, in missionary terms. We read they had been going from town to town, and that the churches had been strengthened in faith and were growing numerically. So they must have been feeling very buoyant – there is nothing like success to cheer people’s spirits. But then they become convinced that God is telling them not to preach in the province of Asia (remember that isn’t the same thing we call Asia today – it was part of what we now call Asia Minor – the region around Ephesus.) Why on earth would God not want them to continue to have that success that was already happening? And when they thought instead they would go to Bithynia – the area on the Asian side of the Bosphorus, opposite what is now Istanbul – again they are clear that God doesn’t want that. We don’t know how they were guided in that way – but the story is clear. One way and another they end up in Troas – the bit of Turkey that is nearest to Greece on the other side of the Aegean, near the site of the ancient city of Troy. It was the main port for travellers between Greece and Asia Minor.

It is there that Paul has his vision of the Greek bloke. There is an old theory that it was a vision of Luke. Remember it is the Greek-born Luke who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, and at this point he stops talking about what ‘they’ did and goes on to say ‘*we* immediately tried to cross over into Macedonia’. Whatever the truth of that – and it is sheer speculation – it is clear that from this point on we have a first-hand account from the author. In terms of Christian history, this is a really significant moment. What had been an obscure offshoot of a middle-eastern religion, known only in that bit of that continent, now becomes something officially proclaimed in Europe. No doubt there had been Christians from Jerusalem, Derbe, Iconium, Lystra, or one of the other places where there were Christian communities who had travelled over to Macedonia. But this was different – it was a missionary journey, with the specific intention of telling these Europeans about Jesus.

They end up at their first real stopping place in Philippi. And they start their work by finding people who would be open to what they had to say. Remember they had been preaching in the synagogues in Asia Minor. But foreign religions were not permitted to practise in Roman colonies at that time, so they go outside the city, to a place by the river where they guess Jews and those sympathetic to Judaism would gather for prayer. There they meet Lydia – not Lydia the tattooed lady of the song, but a wealthy businesswoman, probably a widow. She was not Jewish, but was attracted to what Judaism had to say about God. And we read that she is quickly baptised, together with her household – presumably her children and servants. And she invites Paul, Timothy and Luke to base themselves at her home.

Now let’s go back to what I was saying earlier – this only happened because God told them *not* to do things – good things – in those other places. This is where the story becomes an ongoing challenge to us

as Christians today. They could only do this more important thing if they cut down on some of the other things they intended to do. You can't do everything. So prioritising what is most important is always an issue (as no doubt it is for any government). But let's keep this within Christian boundaries. The Church nationally, every Diocese could say it would be great to do all sorts of very good things, but there simply isn't the money. So where should what is available go? What is essential, what is preferable, what would be great in an ideal world all have to be debated and decided. Every church has to do that at its own level – deciding where its energy (and indeed its money) will go. One of the besetting sins of churches is that people feel they have got to do everything, sometimes with the result that nothing is done particularly well. It means being prepared to say sometimes 'we are going to stop doing this or that' because at this point we don't have the personnel, or the resources or whatever, to do it properly.' That isn't defeatism, but realism.

But it applies to every single one of us what says we are trying to follow Christ. In order to do what God *really* wants of us, we may have to decide *not* to do other things. And those other things may be perfectly good, laudable things. It isn't a question of ditching unprofitable activities, but saying this other thing is more important at this particular moment. Most of us will have done that time and again in relation to families. Someone is taken ill, and so we drop everything to help out. The new demand on our time and energy completely outweighs anything else. It is about being really alive to God's calling. It is sad that we have often restricted that language of 'calling' to just some quite narrow spheres, like being a priest, or a nurse. God calls every one of us to something or other. In Paul's picture language in the letter to the Corinthians, we are all interdependent parts of the body of Christ. For Lydia in our reading, that meeting with Paul was crucial – and changed the course of her life. She is the first convert to Christianity in Europe. Why aren't there lots of St Lydia's churches? She isn't even listed as a saint in the Calendar. But she wouldn't have found faith had it not been for Paul and his friends deciding firstly what *not* to do, and secondly being obedient to the call of what they *should* do. We can learn a lot from their story – and indeed, we can learn a lot from Lydia.