

# The Lord opened her heart ...

*... to listen eagerly to what Paul said.*

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*The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2019 by the Associate Vicar, the Revd. Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster.*

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

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple  
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.  
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves  
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.  
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired  
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells  
And run my stick along the public railings  
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.  
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain  
And pick flowers in other people's gardens  
And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat  
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go  
Or only bread and pickle for a week  
And hoard pens and pencils and beermats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry  
And pay our rent and not swear in the street  
And set a good example for the children.  
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.  
But maybe I ought to practise a little now?

So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised  
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple. *(Thank you, Jenny Joseph)*

Purple....it's outrageous! That's probably why I love it...the colour of a certain chocolate brand, the colour of my favourite boots and the colour of royalty (and of Bishops, but we'll skip past that one!)- forever a colour of decadence and occasion.

There's a reason purple is so splendid and extravagant.....in Romans times when Dyes were natural rather than synthetic, the dye for purple was made from a juice found in minute quantities in shellfish. It took thousands of crustaceans to make a yard or two of purple cloth. So it was very expensive, only for the elite. It was a statement of status and wealth, the Roman equivalent to a Gucci handbag or a Rolex watch.

Purple wasn't just an indicator of Roman wealth. It was a symbol of political power. The more important you were as a Roman senator, the more purple decoration you had on your tunic and your toga. The emperor, and only the emperor, would wear a toga made entirely of purple cloth.

This is all worth knowing as we take a look at Paul and his latest adventures in sharing the good news of Jesus around the Roman empire. The book of Acts tells the story of the early church- the spread of Christianity after Jesus' resurrection. The people who carried the message and those who heard it.

If you were here last week, we explored Peter sharing the gospel with gentiles and the challenge of welcoming and including those who think and believe radically different things from us. This week we've skipped to much later in the narrative where we hear about Paul discovering that gentile women are also included- but more of that shortly.

Paul was more than enthusiastic after his own dramatic conversion experience and had travelled through Asia with Barnabas, igniting people's faith in Jesus and starting churches. But they had come back to a less than rapturous welcome from the Jerusalem church, who wanted to know why they were baptising Gentiles. Paul had then fallen out with Barnabas, and set off on his next journey with Silas instead.

Paul felt the Spirit had forbidden them to go back to Asia but instead is called in a vision, as we heard read earlier, to Macedonia. He goes to Philippi, on the outer fringe

of the Jewish Diaspora, but finds no synagogue where he could preach the gospel; so he goes down to the river probably looking for Jewish leaders, and finds 'only' women.

As I've been reading through the book of Acts I must confess that I'm seeing it in my mind as a kind of Roman soap opera- the number of rows, fights, locations, highs and lows would fit well with the Roman cast of Eastenders- or perhaps Emmerdale for a better northern soap! I smile as I picture the scene of Paul and Silas, hunting for their fellow Jewish men....and stumbling across a group of women. Not just any women, but a group that included a certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God and a dealer in PURPLE!

Those of you who were listening carefully, will remember that the reading said 'purple cloth'- but the literal translation simply states that Lydia deals in PURPLE...she is a powerful, wealthy, independent woman. Her business connections would have reached to the heart of Roman power and politics- she would have supplied the who's who of the day- whatever their needs.

I can only imagine Paul and Silas were entirely out of their comfort zone. Jewish men talking to powerful non-Jewish women. Their plans of explaining their new found ideas about Jesus Christ to the local rabbis thrown out the window- and instead, a woman of PURPLE who wants to know more.....symbolically, this is the message of God's upside down kingdom encountering the imperial purple. The battle between Roman power and the message of the gospel meet in the heart of a woman.

I wonder how many of us feel incredibly uncomfortable about the idea of sharing our faith with anyone- our friends and family, let alone a complete stranger....but there is a lovely phrase in the narrative here- *The Lord opened her heart....*

This links to the gospel reading where Jesus tells his disciples that they don't have to worry about anything because the Holy Spirit will bring peace and show the way.

I think all of us worry about sharing our faith:

*~ I have so many doubts,*

*~ I can't answer theological questions,*

*~ they might never speak to me again,*

*~they'll just think I'm a hypocrite because my life is such a mess*

but here's the thing....we're not responsible for all of that. God is the one who draws people to himself, there are so many ways that people can find answers to questions and explore for themselves...BUT, we, like Paul, might just find ourselves by the river, chatting to Lydia who deals in PURPLE! That is, we might find ourselves in the most unlikely of places when someone who scares us a bit asks us if we believe in God, or why we go to church, or if we're a Christian or if we can help with their problems....all we have to do is tell the truth and share what we are confident about:

*~ yeah, I go to the Minster- let me know if you ever want to come along, they've got a fabulous choir!*

*~ I'm not sure if I'm a Christian- I'm still working it out- but I know some great people to chat to if you want to know more, I could invite you round for coffee with them.*

*~ I wish I knew the answer to your question- but I just don't....shall I ask someone at my church? I'll get back to you*

*~ Do you know, we have these amazing people at our church who pray for an hour every lunchtime....I'm not sure how to help, but I can write your request in our book and they will pray- would that be ok?*

*~ I'd love to pray for you- I pray every evening...would that be ok? Keep me posted*

Lydia heard Paul's message and was Baptised, along with her household. Then she invited Paul and Silas to come and stay with them.

In true soap opera style, a few sentences later, Paul and Silas are thrown in prison (for setting a slave girl free) and by the time they go to Lydia's house on their release, the church in Phillipi has been established in her home- she is hailed as one of the early

church leaders and the church in Phillipi becomes one of the flourishing and most encouraging Christian communities that Paul enabled.

As a Christian woman in leadership, who loves all things purple....you can imagine why I rather like this story. But I hope for all of us it offers the encouragement that sometimes God's plans are very different from ours. That we may encounter the most surprising people - and simply sharing our story, our doubts as well as our faith doesn't have to be scary and that opening our homes to others and sharing our lives is at the heart of what church was intended to look like. I'm excited for our new season of home groups and the stories and adventures that will emerge as we share our lives together.

And if right now your life feels more like the soap opera I've been alluding too...God will be in the midst of that too- hold onto his promise:

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

You may want to go and sit with our prayer ministry team during communion - who will be in the quire and delighted to pray for you and hold your struggles in confidence.

And finally, purple....

Maybe we ought to practise a little now?

So people who know us are not too shocked and surprised

When suddenly we are old, and start to wear purple.

## Reading Texts

Acts 16:9-15

<sup>9</sup> During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." <sup>10</sup> When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

<sup>11</sup> We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup> and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district<sup>[a]</sup> of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. <sup>13</sup> On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup> A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. <sup>15</sup> 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." And she prevailed upon us.

John 14:23-29

<sup>23</sup> Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. <sup>24</sup> Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

<sup>25</sup> "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup> But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. <sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. <sup>28</sup> You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater

than I. <sup>29</sup> And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.