

**Change of plan**  
*Psalm 67, Acts 16:9-15*

26 May 2019

Well, it wasn't a vision at Troas that took me to Macedonia, as it happened with the Apostle Paul, - it was a Travel Company, which organises trips to the Holy Land and to other religious destinations. We flew into Thessaloniki Airport, where a coach was waiting for us and from there we had a straight run to Neapolis, now called Kavala. This happened three years ago and our trip was entitled 'In the footsteps of St Paul'. Having spent the first night in Kavala, the following morning we travelled the short distance of 10 miles to Philippi. Or at least to a place where the city of Philippi used to be. There is no longer a city there, only an archaeological site of the remaining ruins where the city, featured in our second Bible reading, had been. But we did find the river which runs outside the city and although there is now no way of pinpointing the exact location, where Lydia and her women friends had gathered for prayer, there is a likely place designated for it. It is a lovely, peaceful spot, which has traditionally been used to commemorate her conversion and baptism in the river. Our group of pilgrims had Holy Communion there under the trees by the small stream and it was a poignant reminder of the momentous event that took place there nearly 2000 years ago: The good news of Jesus Christ had arrived in Europe and Lydia became the first Christian in Europe!

There is a lot of talk these days in certain circles about 'Christian Europe', yet curiously enough Lydia's role in it is all but forgotten. We vaguely remember that the Apostle Paul had something to do with it on one of his missionary journeys, but even amongst Christians Lydia's name is not particularly well-known. It is true she is honoured as a saint in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches – in some she is even given the title 'Equal to the Apostles' - yet she is quite often lost in the post-Easter events, when Peter and Paul dominate the scene.

As we look at today's reading from Acts, we find that Paul's meeting with Lydia had almost never happened. Macedonia did not feature on Paul's itinerary. He was based at Antioch at the time having already one successful missionary journey under his belt. And now he had his eye on Asia hoping to find fertile ground for spreading the Gospel there. However, things don't always go to plan,

do they? How many times do we make big plans and they come to nothing? We bump into closed doors. I am sure we can all recall events in our own life when our hopes were dashed and we have found ourselves in unplanned, unexpected situations. It seems, the only safe plan to make is to plan for surprises.

Well, it happened to Paul in a spectacular way: he experienced, what one commentator calls *the negative guidance of the Spirit*. He and his companions tried to go to the province of Asia to the south and west, then to the region of Bythinia to the north, but in both cases the 'Spirit of Jesus wouldn't allow them' - as Luke, the writer of Acts, puts it. There is no particular reason given, why those two plans of Paul were frustrated, whether his papers were not in order at the border crossing or he didn't have a relevant currency at hand, or he fell ill (which apparently happened quite frequently), suffice it to say, that in Luke's interpretation this was taken as divine guidance in a negative sort of way.

In the history of Christian missionary activities this kind of negative guidance is quite well-known. David Livingstone, the famous 19<sup>th</sup> c Scottish physician and missionary intended to go to China. The London Missionary Society wanted to send him to the West Indies, yet he ended up in Africa. Before that, William Carey, the 18<sup>th</sup> c Baptist missionary was originally planning to go to the South Seas, to Polynesia, but has found himself guided to India. Or nearer to our time, there was Mother Teresa, another woman of Macedonia, who after nearly twenty years of teaching in a Convent School in Calcutta, received a new 'call within her call', which meant she had to leave behind her teaching and take up the cause of the dying poor on the streets of Calcutta. And, I am sure there are a lot more, unrecorded stories like that. Things don't work out as planned and one has to change direction. But, as a church sign says: "If you are headed in the wrong direction, God allows U-turns".

So Paul and his companions have to take a U-turn and start working on a plan C. As they do so, Paul has a dream, which he takes as a *positive guidance*, and this is where today's reading from Acts picks up the story. A man appears to him urging him to go to Macedonia and help the people there. From the Biblical descriptions we have an idea about Paul as a strong, determined character, who is not easily swayed from his purpose. Sometimes, he has to be struck with blindness, before he realises that he is heading in the wrong direction. Yet, today's reading shows another side of him, a

new and better side. *He can lead people, because he himself is open to the leading of the Spirit.* How open are we to the leading of the Spirit? A leading, which can be restraining, as well as positively guiding? Can we stand still long enough to listen and work these things out for ourselves? Or are we like Paul, not always making the work of the Spirit very easy! I think, sometimes we can be so wrapped up in our own problems, in our own plans, that we cannot hear that other voice, or see that other vision, which would guide us in another direction. If and when we do, we might find surprising openings, surprising hospitality by surprising people, who are similarly open to the Spirit of Christ – just like Paul did.

As we read the story further, we see that the surprises of the Spirit are not over for Paul even after he finally does head for Philippi: when he gets there *the man of Macedonia turns out to be a woman*, in the person of Lydia! Quite a surprise for both of them, I imagine. There is Lydia, the God-fearing Gentile woman with a spiritual hunger in her heart and there is Paul, who would normally start his work in a synagogue, who has already unsuccessfully searched the city, but was unable to find 10 religious Jewish males within its gates, who would make up a synagogue. He is left with a few praying women somewhere outside the city. Not a very promising start for an ambitious evangelist in those patriarchal times! As one commentator points out, Paul, as a good Pharisee in his previous life would have recited the daily prayer “I thank you Lord, that you have not made me a slave, a woman or a Gentile”. Yet, his first three converts in Europe would be a woman, a slave and a Gentile. And the commentator adds: “who says the Lord doesn’t have a sense of humour?!”

So, it may have been a man who called Paul to Macedonia, but it is this woman, Lydia and her friends who actually listen to his message and receive it with great eagerness. The scarce details in Acts do not tell us much about Lydia. Her picture that emerges seems to be somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, she is an independent, probably quite wealthy business woman, head of her own household, who deals in fine purple materials used by kings and queens and other elite parts of society. Yet, on the other, because of working with purple dye – a smelly and stigmatized profession, with workshops usually situated outside the cities – it is quite possible that her financial situation cannot make up for her marginalized social status.

But, none of this seems to matter in the encounter that ensues. As Lydia’s honest seeking meets Paul’s openness and undeterred zeal, the Good News of Jesus Christ spreads into new territories. It is a personal bonus to them, that in the process they, not only both find what they are looking for, but they are also shaped into a better version of themselves. This seems to be the hallmark of true evangelism and any missionary enterprise. Going by Lydia’s hospitality and her already prominent position among the praying women, it is more than likely that she becomes the first leader of the house church at Philippi and probably their major financial supporter as well.

And Paul, well Paul carries on with his missionary work, travelling amazing distances, this time the whole length of Greece from North to South, ending up in Athens and Corinth and growing in stature as he goes. He pushes on regardless of his successes or his failures, whether he is free to speak or thrown into prison; he enrols women and Gentiles and runaway slaves to the cause of Christ and all the time carries with him the joyful memories and loving support of the Philippians as his most lyrical epistle to them testifies. And all this in a city, which he never intended to visit in the first place. He only got there because he was willing to change his plans. “Whoever has ears, let them hear” as Jesus would say. (*Mat 13:9*).

*Erna Stevenson  
Amersham Free Church*