

The Conversion of Lydia

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[0 : 00] As we heard so beautifully in the reading and in our intercessory prayer, we are thinking! A dealer in purple cloth whose heart was open to the message of Paul. Let us pray.

! May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever missed the boat? I mean literally missed the boat. It happened to me in Piraeus, the seaport of the city of Athens in Greece. I wanted to sail to the island of Patmos. In the days before the internet, I simply turned up at the harbour ticket office and asked for the next ferry to Patmos. It's just leaving, I was told, and so I rushed to the pier, only to see the ferry gliding slowly away from the quayside.

I was then a divinity student training for the ministry. I was disconsolate. The ferry would have taken me to a place that had caught my imagination in studying the New Testament, the island of Patmos. This is the island where John had received his message from God for the persecuted churches of his day, as recorded in the revelation of John, the last book of the Bible. I'd so wanted to be in the place where John received his revelation from God, but I had literally missed the boat.

[1 : 55] And so I traipsed back to the harbour ticket office and took the next ferry, any ferry, out of Piraeus, with no thought to where it was heading, some seaport in the far north of Greece.

But as the ferry sailed to the Greek island of Chios, off the coast of Turkey, it slowly dawned on me that I was travelling in the very same sea lanes that the Apostle Paul had sailed in his missionary journeys round the eastern Mediterranean. As I sat on the deck reading of those journeys in the little pocket Bible I carried, I realised that we were heading for the very port where the Apostle Paul had landed in Europe for the first time in Europe for the first time to preach the good news of his Saviour Jesus Christ.

My disappointment at missing the boat to Patmos turned into excited anticipation at the prospect of landing in the very seaport named in today's reading from Mike from Acts chapter 16, Neapolis. Here on screen now is a modern day mosaic outside a church in Neapolis. Today it's called Kavala, the city.

The mosaic vividly tells the story Mike read from Acts chapter 16. Paul's calling to come over from Troas in modern day Turkey to proclaim the good news in Macedonia in what is today Greece.

[3 : 42] On the left and centre of the mosaic we see the Apostle Paul having his vision in which there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying come over to Macedonia and help us.

And on the right of the mosaic we see Paul responding to this vision, sailing to Neapolis, the seaport for the city of Philippi where Paul would begin his preaching tour.

I still remember that old ferry boat landing at night time in Kavala, the modern day name for Neapolis. As I walked off the ferry ramp onto dry land, just another anonymous backpacking student in the crowd.

I was deeply moved to think of the Apostle Paul arriving in that very same seaport. He too must have been just another anonymous face in the crowd.

And yet, he was about to change the history of the world by bringing the gospel to Europe. Now that is a bold statement to make.

[4 : 58] One wee man stepping off a ferry boat changed the world. At least the ferry boat was running, we might say in Scotland. That would change our world.

But seriously, to claim that Paul's arrival in Europe changed the world, isn't that just an example of a preacher's purple prose?

Over the top language for effect, but not true when you look at that claim in the cold light of day. Well, let's examine my bold claim by looking at what happens next when Paul and his traveling companions arrive in Philippi.

Paul follows his usual practice on his missionary journeys. He first looks out for his own diaspora Jewish community in the city he is visiting.

Only this time, he does not find a synagogue to connect with in Philippi. Philippi, you see, is a Roman colony settled by military veterans from the Roman army.

[6 : 05] There is no synagogue where he might bring the good news of the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus. Instead, after staying some days in Philippi, presumably looking for that synagogue, Paul went out on the Sabbath day outside the city to the river, where he thought there might just be a place of prayer.

It's what happens next that I want to suggest to you change the world. We read in Acts chapter 16, verse 13, Paul and his companions, we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. What may seem to us in our era of women's emancipation, an innocuous statement of fact, they sat down with the women gathered there, was in fact a revolutionary act in Paul's day.

Let's bring up the third image now. The conversion of Lydia. The fact that there was no synagogue in Philippi suggests that there were not the requisite ten Jewish men in the city that were needed in Jewish tradition to constitute a synagogue.

Instead, Paul, an observant Jewish man, is happy to sit down to speak with this all-women prayer meeting. Not only that, the one woman in particular who is highlighted in this prayer meeting is not herself Jewish, but what is described in Acts chapter 16 as a worshipper of God.

[7 : 54] That term should ring a bell for us. Last Sunday, we thought of the Apostle Peter's encounter with the Roman centurion, described in Acts chapter 10. Cornelius, you remember, was described as a God-fearer, a Gentile, a non-Jew, who did not convert to Judaism, but nonetheless was drawn to the piety and the morality of the synagogue.

Cornelius was a Gentile worshipper of the one true God of Israel. Similarly with this woman called Lydia, whom we are introduced to here in Acts chapter 16.

She is described as a worshipper of this God too. If there was no synagogue in Philippi, how then would Lydia have encountered the Jewish community who worshipped the one true God?

We're given a clue. We are told that she is from the city of Thyatira, in what is now modern-day Turkey. Unlike Philippi, we do know that there was a large Jewish community in her home city in that time.

Before settling in Philippi, it is highly likely that Lydia had been drawn to the worship of the Jewish synagogue in her home city of Thyatira.

[9 : 17] More than that, we learn that Lydia was a businesswoman, a dealer in purple cloth. That too rings true.

Her home city of Thyatira was a major production centre for dyeing cloth. Especially the fabric dyed in the colour the Romans prized most of all.

Purple. Only privileged and wealthy Romans were allowed to dress in purple robes or could afford this luxury cloth.

And so we have a clear picture of a remarkable woman in the patriarchal world of the ancient Mediterranean. Lydia is an independent businesswoman trading in purple cloth in the Roman city of Philippi, drawing on her trade links with her home city of Thyatira.

It is rare that a woman is named in the ancient world independently of her father or husband. We can thus assume that Lydia was either widowed or divorced and maintained her own household, which would be both her shop for trading cloth and her home for living.

[10 : 37] So what is revolutionary about this woman's conversion? In telling the story of the spread of Christianity in Europe, historians rightly make much of the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity in the early 4th century.

The conversion of Constantine is seen as the beginning of Christendom, that world where church and state were united in ruling and shaping a Christian society across Europe.

Scotland was very much part of that world of Christendom. If you go to St Macca's Cathedral in Old Aberdeen, you can still see the medieval ceiling designed to show Scotland as a kingdom at the heart of Christendom.

The ceiling has three rows of heraldic shields. The Pope and all his leading bishops are in the centre row. On the Pope's left, the Holy Roman Emperor, followed by the Christian kings of Europe, with England quite far down the list.

And on the Pope's right, the King of Scots, followed by his nobility. Before the World Cup, this is how we showed the world who we are as Scots.

[11 : 58] The milestone in the conversion of Europe in Christianity to Christianity, it is usually claimed, was the conversion of the most powerful man in the known world at that time, the Emperor Constantine.

I want to say no. According to the book of Acts, the conversion of Europe began not with a powerful man, but with an independent businesswoman in the male world of the Roman Empire, Lydia, a dealer in luxury goods whose heart was open to listening to Paul's gospel.

This is revolutionary. And turns the history of Christianity upside down from the usual way it is told by Christians and caricatured by our critics as the story of powerful men.

Just as the first witness to Christ's resurrection is a woman, Mary Magdalene in the garden, and not the cowardly apostles who ran away. So the first convert to Christianity in Europe is a spiritually hungry woman, Lydia, running her dealership and not the power-hungry men running their empires. This painting on screen of Lydia listening intently to Paul's message about Jesus of Nazareth should ring another bell for us. It reminds us of another incident in the Gospels where that same Jesus was in the house of Mary and Martha.

[13 : 40] While Martha was rushing around to provide a meal, Mary, like Lydia, was sitting intently at Jesus' feet listening to his life-giving message.

It is the conversion of women like Lydia to the way of Jesus Christ that has truly changed our world in history and changes our world today.

You remember the film of your minister Gordon in Burundi with Tear Fund that we showed a week or two ago. Gordon told the story of how the local church there is involved in community development work to transform the lives of remote villages.

We saw pictures not only of the new bridge and road but also of women starting their own businesses to earn a living and support their families.

All the development data from around the world shows that the most effective way to improve societies in poverty, including this Scottish society, is to educate girls and empower women in the economy.

[14 : 57] Too often in the history of the Christian church, the downward pool of traditional male dominance has countered the revolutionary message of the Gospels and the Book of Acts.

That this good news was first embraced in Europe by a businesswoman, a pioneer for all women who have been at the heart of the church's life and mission ever since and today.

Our concern to see others turning with us to the way of Jesus Christ, like the young people that Gordon showed us at Teen Ranch, our concern to see others turning with us to the way of Jesus Christ is not about regaining the church's secular power in society, like Constantine.

It is about recovering the church's spiritual power in Paul's gospel, like Lydia. The conversion of Lydia has three characteristics that we need to covet for ourselves as Craig Lockhart Parish Church.

First, we learn that the Lord had opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. Lydia was a faithful hearer of the word of Christ, attentive to his truth and so must we be.

[16 : 24] Second, we learn that she responded to Paul's message by being baptized with her household into the household of God, the church of Jesus Christ. Lydia was a faithful member of the body of Christ, belonging to his church and so must we be.

again, this should ring a bell for us.

We have seen these three marks of conversion before in the stories of Paul and Ananias and Peter and Cornelius in the book of Acts. They too were receptive and attentive to the word of God.

They too entered the waters of baptism and welcomed the unclean to their table and into their homes. They too stayed in the homes of believers to enjoy table fellowship across the religious and ethnic divides of their society and encouraged one another in their common faith in Jesus.

These are the true marks of conversion that we learn from the conversion of Lydia. A heart open to God's word and a door open to God's children.

[18:00] If we bear these marks of conversion in our life together, we shall never miss the boat.
Let us pray. Amen.