

Lydia, The Rag Merchant

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] There really is an announcement to be made, and that is that next week at the Keg Caesar, where they are always advertising this, Thursday at the Keg Caesar, there will be a luncheon to which you are invited, and the speaker will be telling the sort of story of her faith, Lisa Owen.

So she may not have wanted to announce that, but I'm happy to announce that. I hope that you will pay very close attention. Today I want just to talk about the lady who is the rag merchant, that is Lydia, and the story that has just been read for you by a lady dressed in purple, which was very appropriate.

I don't know, Carolyn, if you'd like to get up once again and just model that coat, so that they will know how appropriate it was that you read it.

Though actually some of the commentators say that purple is a kind of general term in the New Testament, and probably means red.

But that's it. There's one of the commentators who wasn't an Anglican. You may, I don't know whether you'll understand this little joke, but he said about sellers of purple, that they more often come into the obedience of faith than the wearers of purple do.

[1 : 30] That was a pretty cynical comment, wasn't it? I, you know, I mean, I'm afraid that some of you, that would go right over your head. But if you're an Anglican, you see, and you're a bishop, you wear a purple, you see.

In fact, and so now I've explained a joke that pretty well kills any joke, doesn't it? There is one good one about a bishop that went into a restaurant with his purple bib on and sat down to lunch, and the waitress came along and said to him, Well, Cockrobin, what'll you have?

So, that was it. What I want to tell you about today is, I want to start by telling you about Gyges. You remember that Gyges, he was a great king. He became a king. He had formerly been a shepherd, but he had a ring. And the ring, which was known as Gyges' ring, if you turned it, you became invisible.

And Plato tells the story of Gyges' ring and what he did when he turned it and became invisible and how he deceived the queen and he deceived the king and he took over the empire.

[2 : 52] And Plato did it in order to demonstrate that if men are not responsible for the consequences of what they do, they will invariably do the evil thing.

Now, that is, in a sense, Plato's doctrine of original sin as opposed to Paul's. But I want you to know that they came pretty close to agreeing on that. Well, Gyges was, in about the 4th century B.C., took over an empire or a section of the Roman Empire, the Greek Empire, I guess as it was. And he was the king of a place called Lydia. And Lydia was one of the sections of what was later the Roman province of Asia.

And Gyges was its king. And one of the principal cities in Lydia, which was in Asia, was Thyatira. Thyatira was noted for a lot of guilds of various kinds of people from potters to rag merchants.

[4 : 13] And it was from Lydia that one particular rag merchant, whose name was Lydia II, named after the country she came from, traveled from Thyatira across into what is modern-day Greece or Macedonia, to a city which is now in ruins but was then the city of Philippi, which was named after the father of Alexander the Great.

And there she conducted business in purple cloth, which was probably used for women's clothing. And she was representing her guild probably as well as her own entrepreneurial interests. And so she was there. One of the characteristics of Thyatira back in Asia, where she came from, was that it had been very much influenced by Jewish immigrants that homesteaded there and became very much established there, probably more so than they had in Philippi.

Because when this lady Lydia got to Philippi, it turns out that she was a, what the Roman Catholic commentator calls a half-Jew, in that she was a worshiper of God.

And like many of the worshipers in the Acts of the Apostles and in the New Testament generally, she was one who presumably conducted her business according to the ethic that was established by the Jewish community.

[6 : 08] So she had a kind of Judeo-ethic, which she used in the conduct of her business, as well as in the conduct of her personal life, so that she was devout in terms of her religion, active and successful in terms of her business.

And it was for that reason that on this particular Sabbath, she could not find a synagogue to go to when she was in this strange city, but she did hear of a meeting for prayer on the Sabbath by the river outside the city of Philippi.

And she went there to meet with other women who did this traditionally on a Sabbath day. They met together to pray. When Paul, who under very sort of peculiar circumstances came to Philippi, and the peculiar circumstance was that he had a vision in the night of a man from Macedonia saying, come over and help us.

And he went over and when he got there, he couldn't find out what to do or where to start. And so he looked around in the city of Philippi and found news of this women's prayer meeting, which took place on the Sabbath.

So he and his companions, who were Silas and Luke, went and joined in the meeting for prayer.

When they joined in the meeting for prayer, there came opportunity for Paul to talk.

[7 : 52] And when Paul talked, he had the peculiar experience that the heart of Lydia was open to the things that he was saying.

And I think that's a very wonderful contemporary verse, because I meet a lot of ladies whose hearts are not open to the things that Paul says.

So it was something new that Lydia was one whose heart was open to the things that Paul said. As the result of this, she professed her faith in Jesus Christ.

On profession of faith, she was baptized along with all her household. And when that happened, she then turned to Paul and to Silas and to Luke and said to them, Now you must come and live in my house where I am, because if you judge that what has happened to me is of the Lord, then you cannot refuse the hospitality that I need to give to you.

And Paul, who apparently was reluctant to do so, was persuaded by Lydia to do so and went to her house and they stayed there. Now this is very significant in terms of the whole sweep of history, because Philippi was the first Christian church established in Europe.

[9 : 38] Lydia was the first convert in Europe to the Christian faith. And Lydia, and subsequently a mad girl who was used as a soothsayer, was the second convert from Philippi.

And the third convert was the jailer, who had Paul and Silas in custody as a result of their interfering with the merchants who used this poor girl as a soothsayer.

So there you have the beginning of a church, the beginning which in sort of the retrospective history is a terribly insignificant event, which led subsequently to, well, I mean you can see it as the beginning of the gospel's impact on Europe and so much of the world.

So it's a very interesting story, isn't it? It's interesting because, you see, that this great, in a sense, missionary thrust of the gospel has this extremely insignificant beginning.

The kind of beginning that could happen right here and right now. That if by the grace and mercy of God someone could hear about Jesus Christ in this meeting, could believe on him, and subsequently be baptized and establish themselves as someone who was seriously concerned to be obedient to Christ, as Lydia was in offering hospitality, that the consequences of that you can't even begin to estimate.

[11 : 49] What would happen if one person made such a decision at a moment like this? Now I tell you that story in order to put maximum pressure on each one of you to get straight about the significance of what happens when Christ is presented.

Well, that's basically the story. And the story is you find it in the passage. But it raises a whole lot of very interesting questions.

The first question that you could ask about it is, well, why was Lydia baptized? What did Paul say to her? And you can only conclude by reading the rest of the Acts of the Apostles what Paul might have said to her.

And what he almost certainly would say would be something like this. Here she was a worshiper. She was used to, on the Sabbath day, reading the scriptures of the Old Testament prophets. Who called for some kind of renewed ethical norm in the lives of people based on a fear and reverence for God.

[13 : 13] And she would know that. And Paul would take those very prophets whom she already knew something about and in the name of the God whom she already believed as being the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.

And she said, now, what these prophets are teaching you, primarily their message points to one who is coming who is the Messiah.

And what I, Paul, have to tell you this morning is that that Messiah has come. You may ask me, well, how do I know he came?

Well, I know he came because he is the one who was spoken of in the prophets who, having come, was almost universally rejected by his own people.

And the very people to whom he came rejected him and nailed him to a cross. Well, that certainly doesn't prove that he was the Messiah.

[14 : 23] No, but it does prove that when the prophets said that the Messiah would be rejected, that this story conforms to them.

And Paul said, but that's not the end of it. The end of it is the very one whom the whole community recognized to be a good man, nailed to a cross.

That one, after he died, was raised again to life, not by any activity of man, but by the intervention of God. The one whom they crucified, God raised.

And God has appointed him to be the judge. And God has spoken to us through this person, Jesus Christ.

Now, basically, Paul might go on to say that he is the judge and he is the one who will judge the living and the dead because God, having raised him from the dead, makes him singularly qualified to do that because he died and he rose again.

[15 : 38] And therefore, we will all stand before him as our judge. and God has made himself and his will known to us through this one. Now, that's basically what Paul would say about Jesus.

And that was what was the basis of Lydia's conversion, that she suddenly heard this. and, you know, that when we listen, we most often hear what we want to hear.

You know, I've told you about, I mean, it happens all the time that people go to hear, go to church to be reinforced in hearing what they've already heard, in being reinforced in what they already believe.

and the possibility of you radically changing your mind about anything in church seems to be fairly remote because it seems to be in our society and in our culture only a place where you are confirmed in the things you already believe.

And you tell the pastor that he has been a great help to you. How has he been a help? By confirming the things you believed when you came in the front door in the first place. Even though it would appear to be his function to say something quite contrary to that and to suggest to you that there may be a whole reality in terms of the purpose of God towards you which is very different and which you need to hear.

[17 : 15] And I must say that as a minister, and I include myself in this, but just reinforcing people in what they already believe isn't very productive.

Nor is it very helpful. Nor does it seem to produce a kind of spiritually dynamic community that discover they have something they want to share with the whole world.

Well, somehow, you see, Lydia heard this. He didn't just reinforce her ethical values. He didn't reinforce what she had already heard about the prophet.

She heard what he was saying about the focus of the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. You see, that's the only distinctive function that the Christian church has in the world today is to bear witness to the uniqueness of the person of Jesus Christ.

That's the message that we have to get across. It doesn't have to do primarily with feeding the hungry or clothing the poor or helping the third world.

[18 : 28] It has essentially to do with announcing or proclaiming who Jesus Christ is. All the rest has to follow on from that.

And you see, that's what Paul did for Lydia and Lydia heard it. And it may be helpful for you to ask yourself when you heard it and what the consequences of that would be.

So you see, even though Lydia, like many other people in the New Testament, Cornelius was a good man who prayed, who gave alms, and yet he came to a new relationship to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Ethiopian eunuch was wealthy, reputable, a leader in his community, a trusted civil servant of his queen, and he too came to a dynamic encounter with Jesus Christ, which led to his being baptized at the roadside because of his confession of faith.

And you can go on in the New Testament and find others like that who, like Lydia, upon confession of faith were immediately baptized as an outward invisible sign of the faith in Christ that they had come to.

[19 : 51] So that was what happened to her and raises the question for all of us, you see, is that respectable conformity to ethical norms is not what religion is about.

What religion is about is understanding that God has spoken to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Now, mostly, there is accompanying the conversion of anybody in the New Testament some kind of miraculous event.

There appears to be no miraculous event in the story of Lydia. Even for Cornelius, there was the speaking in tongues and the Holy Spirit coming on them in a peculiar way.

There was the raising of the man who was crippled, who sat at the beautiful gate. Time after time, there was events which took place which were miraculous in nature, which seemed to clench the reality of faith.

Here, that doesn't happen. There doesn't appear to be any miracle or miraculous event connected with this, which means that what Paul said about Jesus Christ has so impacted on this person's life that she said, I believe.

[21 : 20] And so that you can only identify the miracle as being that she heard Paul. And part of the miracle that might be part of your life and faith was that at a given point and under given, in a given situation, you too might have heard concerning Jesus Christ.

And having heard, your life was changed by receiving the Holy Spirit. And that that could be quite a kind of garden variety event in your life with, as in the case of Lydia, the most tremendous consequence, which began in an almost instinctive way when she said, you must accept my hospitality.

If you believe this thing is of God, then you are committed to accepting my hospitality. She did that thing in faith. So it's intriguing that that happened.

Another thing that you could ask about in connection with this story is is this is this matter of how does business and religion mix together?

How do you how do you do it? How does your faith in Christ balance out in the way that you might conduct your business?

[22 : 59] Now, I know all sorts of people. I run into them all the time. People who would say that they conduct their business according to a biblical ethic.

And for them, that's what the Christian faith is all about, that they conduct their business on that basis. But Christianity is not essentially an ethic.

Christianity is a relationship to Jesus Christ out of which an ethic emerges, a way of behaving, behaving not in obedience to a law that is given, but behaving in response to a relationship that you're involved in.

And so, it's not impossible that you, no matter what business you are in, that we could help each other learn to live in this way so that we conduct ourselves not in a way which will make a public demonstration of our sanctity to the world around us, but in a way which will be a perhaps secret and un...

a kind of secret and... well, I'm stuck. it's... it's...

[24 : 26] it's... that nobody could identify it in terms of its source except you and that you know that in this situation you are acting out of your own relationship to Jesus Christ and that you probably, like Lydia, need a circle of people with whom you pray regularly in order to test out whether in fact this is happening or whether you have a strange duality going on in your world in which you are pretending one thing and being another which is what the world thinks Christianity is anyway that you profess one thing and you behave another thing but it's living out of that relationship to Jesus Christ in fellowship with others with whom you pray in order that you might know that at the basis of

your life there is that kind of consistency even in the midst of what might generally appear to be glaring contradictions because you were living out of that relationship

I want just to end up by showing you time for a new felt pen two ladies and these two ladies are both ladies of Thyatira and one of them is named Lydia and the other one goes by the name of Jezebel and people think that that's probably not her real name but she too both these ladies had in common that they came from Thyatira both of them are mentioned in scripture both of them were involved in the Christian church one of them as someone who came to believe and put her faith in Jesus Christ and to bring her whole household into that faith through baptism and the other one who was exalted to a position of being a leader and I don't know whether this is in the ancient and wonderful wisdom of God a simple demonstration that the wonderful lady

Lydia had a kind of counterbalance in terms of Jezebel because Jezebel was at Thyatira too where Lydia returned to and Thyatira was one of the cities to which John wrote a letter in the Revelation and he talks about Jezebel Jezebel appears when John writes to the church and says but I have this against you that you tolerate the woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols I gave her time to repent but she refused to repent of her immorality I will throw her on a sick bed and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation unless they repent of her doings and so you see in a sense this wonderful sort of

New Testament contrast between the Jezebel who as a prophetess and a teacher in the church led people into immorality which is of course the real problem for many Christians and for many Christian communities is immorality and the temptation for Christian teachers and leaders has been to accommodate immorality rather than to challenge it and that's what Jezebel did she accommodated it and when John writes his letter to Thyatira when the Lord writes the letter to Thyatira he says this is unacceptable and Thyatira has another lady who is a model of response to the gospel in the person of Lydia so in this sort of balance and contrast you have a wonderful picture of the way the church gets grounded in the faith of Christ and established in a relationship to him let me pray our God and Father thank you for your word thank you that your word is steeped and anchored in history and in the lives of individual people because each of us is caught up in the history of our own lives and in the peculiar circumstances of our individual personality and we thank you that as we by your grace and in your mercy confront your word the proclamation concerning Jesus Christ that you can draw us to put our faith and trust in you we ask that you will and that we may be given ears to hear the things we need to hear in the circumstances of our lives in the practice of morality in the midst of a culture that accepts many immoralities in the practice of a business which accepts that a man may secretly do anything he can to achieve success without respect to truth grant that we may without shame be able to live our lives in the obedience of faith in Jesus Christ in whose name we pray amen