

PENWORTHAM UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

Sermon for Sunday 1st May 2016 – Rev'd David Coaker

Readings: Psalm 67; Acts 16:9–15

Reflection

Paul has a vision of a man in Macedonia pleading for help, so Paul leads his group there to the town of Philippi, where they discover that women from the area are praying down by the river.

This group of women were most likely Greeks, who were God-fearers (believing in one God over the pantheon of Greek gods).

Lydia, a wealthy woman who was with the others there, has her whole household baptized after listening to Paul and the others, and invites them to stay with her.

While the vision was of a man calling for help, they found Lydia, and she becomes a prominent figure in the early church.

So was Paul's vision inaccurate? The vision he had was of a Macedonian man pleading for help, the result was an already God-fearing, wealthy, Thyatiran woman helping them.

You would have thought that Paul would have taken Luke, the writer of Acts, to one side and encouraged him to fine tune the story. But no, so we are left with a contrasting vision and result to ponder.

Paul was an educated Pharisee and a Roman citizen, with a mission to declare the good news of God in Christ Jesus.

All of his upbringing and experience of life would give rise to him having certain assumptions about things. He was a man in a strongly patriarchal culture. Educated in a world where few had training or thoughts beyond the tasks necessary to keep them from starving. He was Jewish, and as he says elsewhere in his letters, a Jew of Jews, so he saw his place within God's chosen people.

So an elevated position within an already exulted people. He was a Roman citizen, part of the establishment of the ruling empire of his age. All this was in his background even before his encounter on the Damascus Road which thrust him from being Christianity's greatest adversary into its greatest exponent.

Given his background it is understandable that the vision he saw was of a man, and of someone pleading for his help. It's understandable, but it does lead us to question the nature of the vision.

The vision's image does not directly relate to the result. So either there is some room for interpretation when visions occur, or there is space for the results to alter following them. Or a bit of both, which I think is probably more likely.

On the screen we have a picture of a stream running through some trees. It was taken by Robin Cohn, a writer of novels based on Biblical women, when she visited the banks of the "River" Gangites, Philippi, Greece. It is the place where tradition sites our reading taking place.

The image we have on eth screen is what a camera captured. We have no sense of anything other than what is captured in this image. We don't know if she was alone or in a crowd. Whether the temperature was warm or cold. If it was a lovely day or a brief break in torrential rain. We also don't know how she felt being there. All we have is the image.

But are we all seeing exactly the same thing?

All of our eyes are different. None of us are seeing precisely the same shade of green. Each of us will be drawn to a different part of the image – we may feel drawn more to the trees, the water, the benches or the path. How each of us perceive the image will be different.

How we respond will also be different. Some may be non-plussed by it, others may be reminded of walks by similar streams, or feel like going for a paddle.

I could go on, but the point is even though it is the same image each of us will perceive it in our own unique way.

All of those possibilities are there when we see something, and something that others are also seeing, so how much more complexity would there be when we think something?

When a thought jumps into our head?

When we have been wracking our brains about something and then wake up in the middle of the night with a solution?

We can have these thoughts in our heads but what happens when we try to describe them?

Our words and language try to make sense of ideas, emotions, and our senses but they never perfectly express what we are trying to say. Saying 'that is a beautiful sunset' doesn't fully express the wonder, sense of peace, humility or awesomeness that such a moment can well up within us. The words we use to describe can only ever be a short-hand for what we truly mean.

Our brains are incredible things; a wonderful gift of God's evolving Creation. But they are limited by all the other parts of us and our interaction with each other and the world around us.

So Paul had a vision, inspiration came to him, and the image he expressed it as was a Macedonian man pleading for help.

It could have been an image his eyes saw and his ears heard.

It might have been a dream from which he awoke.

It might have been a thought that he interpreted using this image. Whatever it was it set him off on the path to Philippi.

Just as an aside, it's worth reminding ourselves that the root meaning of angel is 'messenger'. Just like Paul's vision the visit of an angel could be seeing what our culture determines an angel to look like, a dream or a thought, but it could be an overheard word, a conversation, reading something, or finding yourself in a place that inspires you and demands your response.

So in response to his vision, the message of God, Paul and his missionary band set off on the 170 miles or so voyage to Neapolis, now known as Kavala, the principal seaport of eastern Macedonia in Northern Greece. From there, they followed a major trade route 10 miles or so inland to reach the Roman colony of Philippi.

This wasn't a sea journey on a nice, big, safe modern ferry. This was a small boat crossing the Mediterranean – with all the possibilities for disaster that could entail, and Paul was ship-wrecked more than once on his journeys.

Then they arrive in Philippi, city dominated by retired Roman legionnaires, with a relatively small Jewish population and hence, no synagogue. This is why we find them heading down to the river to find a gathering place for Jews and Jewish converts on the Sabbath.

Now if Paul stuck rigidly to his vision he would have walked away. His vision was of a man pleading for help, and here he finds a group of women perfectly content with their lives and their devotions. But he chooses to remain, to sit and talk to the women, to share the story and teaching of Jesus and, most importantly, trust in God.

Paul's words and his presence there resulted in Lydia being inspired and responding. Again we have language that is similar to that of visions, angels, and messengers of God: 'The Lord opened her heart'.

Lydia heard the message, trusted the messenger, and responded by having her whole family and household baptized, and went on to found and lead the church in Philippi.

Paul heads off on this journey to help a man but the result is that he is aided by a woman.

Lydia was a Gentile, but a convert to Judaism. Her home town of Thyatira (modern day Akhisar in Turkey), was renowned for its prized cloth of distinctive purple colour. In the ancient world the colour purple was a sign of high rank – probably because of the high cost involved in obtaining the dye – so there would have been a buoyant market among the ex-military population of Philippi. So it seems that Lydia was a business-woman, probably the Macedonian agent of a manufacturer back in Thyatira.

What is important in all of this, is not the specifics of Paul's vision but his willingness to respond to it, and to also be open to the spirit of it as his journey unfolded.

He didn't limit hearing God's message to a single moment, but was open to hearing it anew in each and every moment. He didn't focus on just the task he initially perceived, but was open to what was before him and the opportunities and possibilities there.

On the Sabbath day, at the most likely spot for finding fellow Jews and potential converts to the way of Jesus, Paul found a gathering of devoted and enquiring women. He stayed and the church was established in Philippi.

If he had been stubborn and kept to his original vision he would have probably walked back into the town, found some Jewish male who wasn't very observant of his faith, and Paul would have left Philippi without the good news of God in Christ Jesus being planted within the community.

So Paul's vision was inaccurate, but that doesn't matter. The important message is that he was open to being inspired and responding to God, willing to adapt as he went along, and trusted in God as he went.

And that is a message for us to hear and live, as individuals, as family and as Church in this place.

May God be gracious to us and bless us.

May God's presence shine upon us.

May God's way be known upon the earth.

Praise God! **Amen**