

ACTS 16.11-15: LYDIA OF PHILLIPI

[Chelmsford 30 May 2010]

The apostle Paul has often been described as the father of misogyny – he was, people say, a man who hated women; who had no time for women.

Just a year or so ago in the *New Statesman* the journalist Richard Herring wrote: “*Paul kept the bitches in their place, whereas Jesus, the sandal-wearing-hippie, clearly thought they should have equality*”!

The reality is very different. In an age when women had no rights and were treated as chattels rather than as people, Paul stated in one of his letters: “**There is no difference between men and women; you are all one in Christ Jesus**” (Gal 3.28).

Not surprisingly many of his converts were women.

Women were attracted to Paul – even though according to one early description of him he was “*a man of little stature, bald, crooked in the legs... with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked*”.

They were attracted because of his message, a message which spoke of God loving men and women in equal measure.

Since we are baptizing two young women this morning, I thought it would be appropriate to look at the story of Lydia, Paul’s first European convert.

What do we know about Lydia?

In the first place we know that she was **a highly successful business woman**.

Now at the best of times that is not easy - even today when equal opportunities have been enshrined in law, there is still often a glass ceiling which makes it difficult for women to get to the top.

But in the ancient world, where equal opportunities didn’t exist and where society was male-dominated, that must have taken some doing - indeed, that must have taken some real strength of character.

Luke tells us that Lydia was “**a dealer in purple cloth**” (v14)

I.e. she was at the upper end of the textile trade - for purple cloth in those days was something really special and really quite expensive.

Only those with money could afford to buy from her.

In our terms, she was the managing director of one of those rather exclusive and expensive boutiques down in Baddow Road like Zaggers or Blue Lawn - managing even a Miss Selfridges, let alone having a stall in the market, would have been beneath her. No, this was a lady who was doing very nicely for herself.

She came from a town called **Thyatira** (v14).

Thyatira was an important manufacturing centre in the West of present-day Turkey. It had long been famous for its dyes. In particular, it was famous for its purple dye, which was obtained from the madder root.

I’m told that even today this town in Turkey is famous for its purple, which is now marketed under the name of ‘Turkey red’.

Perhaps we are to think of Lydia as being a highly successful overseas agent of a Thyatiran manufacturer.

Was Lydia married? Or was she a career-minded single woman?

We don't know. No reference is made of any husband. She could have been a widow.

One thing for certain: she could afford staff: not only did she have a house of her own large enough to accommodate guests, she also had staff – probably a number of slaves to help her run the home and work in the business.

This then was the lady whom *Paul met when he went* a mile or so out of the city *down to the river Gangites*.

It is important to notice that Paul went down to the river not because he wanted to swim, but because he wanted to pray - or rather, he wanted to meet with a group of people who went to the river to pray. **“On the Sabbath we went out of the city to the riverside, where we thought there would be a place where Jews gathered for prayer”** (v13)

Why gather for prayer at a river? Because *Jews baptised* and engaged in other ritual ‘washings’ - and if you didn't have a building of your own with its own baptistery, then a river would have to do.

It would appear that the Jewish colony in Philippi was too small to have a building of its own - a synagogue could only be built where there were at least ten Jewish families - instead some Jewish women together with other religiously-minded women were in the habit of meeting together on the Sabbath at the river.

Lydia herself was a Gentile and not a Jewess.

Luke describes her as **“a woman who worshipped God”** (v14) - i.e. she worshipped the God who had made himself known to the Jews.

Like a good number of her contemporaries, she had become dissatisfied with the pretentious teachings of the Greek philosophers and the fantastic myths some Greeks peddled about the gods of Mount Olympus.

She longed for God himself, and so she joined up with this small women's group.

Paul and Silas in their turn joined the group too: **“We sat down and talked to the women who had gathered there”** (v13), says Luke.

Today preachers stand to talk from a pulpit or a lectern. But in Paul's day Jewish teachers sat down to teach. And it was teaching which Paul was into.

He joined the women's group to teach them about Jesus,

- about the one to whom the Jewish Scriptures all pointed
- about Jesus, the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.

And Lydia was one of those who heard him.

This morning I would like to suggest that Lydia, this successful business woman, offers a role model – not least to young women like Hannah and Poppy

1. LYDIA HAD AN ENQUIRING MIND, AND TOO SHOULD WE

In the first place she was prepared to listen to this new teaching about Jesus. I remember talking to a 16 year old who told me that he didn't believe in all this Christianity stuff. But, I said, have you actually examined the evidence? Or have you simply made up your mind, and don't want to be confused with the facts? When Paul arrived, Lydia didn't walk off. She stayed to hear him. What's more, she actually listened to what he had to say. Some people when they come to church allow the sermon to go in one ear and out the other. But not Lydia. Lydia had been searching for God. Indeed, it was her search for God which had led her to join this women's group. So when Paul arrived, she stayed to listen.

She was '*open-minded*'. Indeed, Luke tells us that "**the Lord opened her mind to pay attention to what Paul was saying**" (v14). Lydia was open to new truth. She was the kind of person who would have

- read a Gospel, had the Gospels been written at that time
- gone along to an Alpha course had such courses existed at that time.

She provides us with a model of a person who has a mind of their own, yet is prepared to be open-minded & examine the Christian faith.

JB Philips, who produced a version of the NT in contemporary English, once wrote: "*Over the years I have had hundreds of conversations with people, many of them of higher intellectual calibre than my own, who quite obviously had no idea of what Christianity is really about. I was in no case trying to catch them out; I was simply and gently trying to find out what they knew about the New Testament. My conclusion was that they knew virtually nothing. This I find pathetic and somewhat horrifying. It means that the most important Event in human history is politely and quietly by-passed. For it is not as though the evidence had been examined and found unconvincing; it had simply never been examined*".

I wonder whether there is anybody here this morning in that category. You've come along this morning out of politeness – you felt you couldn't turn down Hannah or Poppy's invitation to be here for their baptism. But you're not normally a church-goer; indeed, you've never really thought about the Christian faith.

If so, then let Lydia become an example. Have an enquiring mind.

Come along to our next Alpha course later in the year.

Use your mind to examine the Christian faith. I guarantee that the Christian faith will not be found to be wanting. For the Christian faith deals with truth - and not least with truth as it is in Jesus.

2. LYDIA HAD A BELIEVING HEART, AND SO TOO SHOULD WE

But Lydia had more than an enquiring mind. She also came to have a believing heart. There came a point when she was able to say to Paul and his companions, “**I am a true believer in the Lord**” (16.15).

How precisely she came to faith, we don't know.

In one sense we don't need to know. Everybody's conversion story is different.

We all become Christians in different ways.

Some like Paul have sudden life-changing encounters with the Lord Jesus – for others like Hannah and Poppy the conversion process is much more gradual.

As far as Lydia was concerned, her enquiring mind led her to faith in the Lord Jesus.

As she listened to Paul, there came a stage when she believed.

Luke tells us: “**The Lord opened her heart**” (NRSV). This expression reminds me of some words of the Risen Christ to be found in Rev 3.20: “**Listen! I stand at the door & knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in**”.

There is a very famous picture by the Victorian artist, Holman Hunt, which depicts Jesus, with a crown of thorns on his head & a lantern in his hand, knocking on a door. The door clearly hasn't been opened for a long while. Weeds are growing against it. Strangely there is no handle on the outside. The handle is only on the inside.

It is for the person inside to hear the voice of Jesus and open the door.

That is a picture of faith. *Jesus is standing outside at the door of the heart of each one of us, and he knocks.*

Many years ago I remember one Sunday evening listening to a sermon on the opening words of the Lord's Prayer, “**Our Father**”, and realizing that if I were to know God as my Father, then I needed to open my life to him.

On returning home, I knelt down and asked the Lord Jesus to come into my life – to be my Saviour, to be my Lord.

Similarly Lydia responded, she opened the door of her heart & invited Jesus into her life. Again, in this respect she offers a role model to us all.

3. SHE HAD AN OBEDIENT WILL

Lydia, no doubt, was a strong-minded person who was used to being her own boss. But when it came to believing in Jesus, *she was prepared to make him Lord of her life*. “**I am a true believer in the LORD**” (v15), she said. Someone who truly believes in Jesus, is someone who obeys him, who accepts his authority over their lives.

Now the Risen Lord Jesus, shortly before he ascended to his Father, declared: “**I have been given all authority in heaven and earth. Go then to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptise them... and teach them...**” (Matt 28). I.e. Jesus expects his followers to be baptized.

Paul in his teaching no doubt made it clear that baptism is part of the disciple-making

process. It was in response to the command of Jesus that Lydia was baptized - presumably in that same river Gangites.

That must have taken some **guts** - especially for a woman of her social standing. But she had an obedient will - she was prepared to do whatever the Lord had commanded.

Similarly this morning Hannah and Poppy are being baptized. They are being baptized not because this is the done thing in a Baptist church, but because this is what the Lord Jesus commanded. Here today they will be declaring their faith in the Lord Jesus, who died and rose for them.

Lydia was a woman with an enquiring mind, a believing heart, an obedient will. What's more, in regard to these 3 aspects of our being, she presents us with a series of **challenges**

1. The challenge in the first place is to **use your mind** - to examine the claims of the Christian faith - the claim that God has come to us in Jesus - the claim that there on the Cross Jesus died for you - the claim that when Jesus rose from the dead, he rose that you might have life. Have you done that?
2. The second challenge is to **respond in faith** - to open the door of your heart & life and say to this Jesus: 'Come in and be my Saviour and my Friend'. Believing is more than an exercise of the mind - it involves the response of the heart. Have you - like Lydia - responded to God's love for you in Jesus?
3. The third challenge is **submit our will to Jesus**. A true believer is a person who has made Jesus not only their Saviour but their Lord. If Jesus is truly our Lord, then - like Lydia - we will be obedient to his command to be baptized. Have you taken that step? If not, then why not?