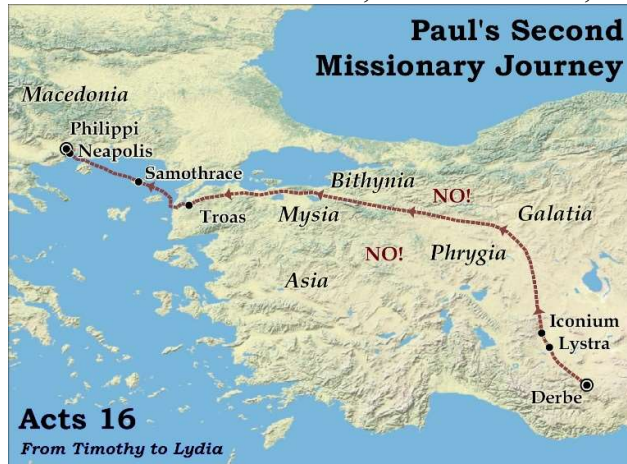


SERMON – ACTS 16.9-15, JOHN 14.23-29 – 22 MAY 2022

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



I've always liked this passage from Acts, though I would have had a couple of the preceding verses:

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; ⁸so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'

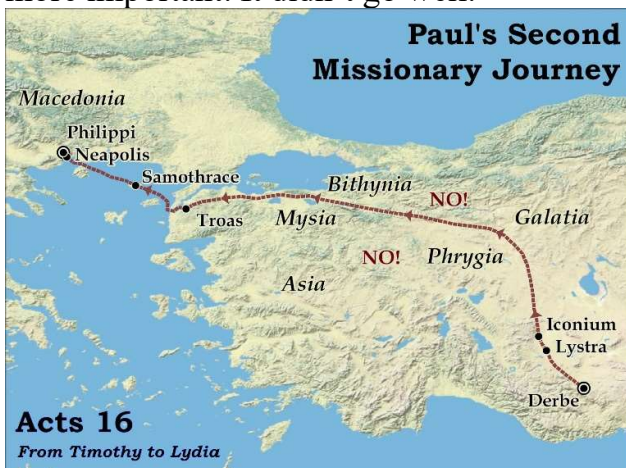
I love the way it is "they went through", "they had come opposite", "they attempted" – and then it changes to "we immediately tried to cross over", "we set sail from Troas", "we remained in this city for some days." Luke, the author of the book of Acts, is not just telling us someone else's story – for this bit at any rate, he was there. This is eyewitness stuff.



Can you imagine them at breakfast, when Paul comes in and tells them of his vision? Most of us would be rather confused and bleary-eyed after such a dream, but I doubt Paul was the sort of man to do confused and bleary-eyed. He knew exactly what God had told him to do and there were no doubts or excuses.



I once had an interview to be John Sentamu's Chaplain when he was Archbishop of York. I didn't get the job, and I think I had a lucky escape. An incredibly dynamic man, with a huge faith and energy – but a few years later I was speaking to the chap who had got the Chaplain's job. He said the problem was that the diary was all organised, everything planned, the Archbishop's Day nicely sorted – then God would speak to him, he'd have a vision, or feel God nudging him as he prayed – and the whole thing would change. "I'd be left trying to explain to the Lord Lieutenant that God had told the Archbishop there was somewhere else he needed to be, or someone who – on this occasion – was more important. It didn't go well."



We are crossing to Macedonia, crossing over into Greece. Symbolically this is important – so far Paul and his team have confined their ministry to the cities and towns in what we know as Turkey, remaining in Asia. Now we are moving to a new area. Because we've only got the story of Acts, we tend to forget there were other Christian leaders, other missionaries, other people already at work – perhaps there was an unwritten agreement that "you go here, I go there" – or perhaps it was just, we are travelling somewhere we have not travelled before.

The geographer in me wants to know how known it was. I wonder if Troas, Samothrace, Neapolis and Philippi was a journey any of the group had made before – or if it really was setting out in to the unknown. I always do my research, have my maps, plan my route, I know where I am going – and, yes, I know I could use sat nav, but it's not as much fun!



I remember one day when the kids were teenagers I was driving along narrow Welsh roads trying to find a steam railway. The weather was typically Welsh and the roads got narrower and narrower. A voice from the back seat “dad, do you know where we’re going?” “I’m navigating by the sun” I replied. Gareth’s reply, “Dad, it’s peeing down. It’s Wales, it’s always peeing down”. He was right, but I found my railway!

I imagine Luke as the sort of doctor who liked a plan. His book reads like that of a man who kept a diary, liked it all sorted, does not like surprises. To me, that is the sort of doctor who inspires confidence. The ones who know what they are doing, and have that air of authority, so you trust them. I remember when we were first told that Gareth needed a heart transplant, my world fell apart. I couldn’t get my head round it. Our consultant at Guy’s Hospital where we were then said to me “Peter, I spend most of my life operating on the hearts of new born babies, trying to repair something the size of a walnut. Gareth’s easy. He’s 14, his heart is big, and they’ll simply replace it. It’s a plumbing job”. His colleagues at Great Ormond Street would probably have hit him for that, a transplant is rather more than a plumbing job, but I needed someone with that confidence. Thank God for them all!



In Philippi they find a place of prayer, outside the city, by the river. You start with the Jews, as they are already worshippers of the one true God. If there isn’t a synagogue building, find out where they meet, and go and join them. You may well find that a Jewish hub had expanded as other men and women, gentiles, had found a faith which they made their own. It is interesting the women are gathered there – interesting questions of where are the men – too often our bible, our church history, gives the image that only the men are important – here

was a group of women, a group of women who accepted the good news about Jesus Christ.



Lydia, we're told, is a dealer in purple cloth – remember purple cloth, the cloth of the emperor, the aristocracy. To make it purple you apparently need to dye it with a dye made from boiling marine snails – Lydia is not the dyer, that would have been difficult, dirty and smelly work – she is the dealer. A woman of business, presumably in the middle, between the dyers of the cloth and the sellers. Her clients would have been the wealthy elite and, if you read on in Acts, she was doing OK for herself. A house big enough so she can offer hospitality to these travellers, and later to a church community – a woman of power, wealth and status, a leader.

We wonder what did these women think when these strange men came and joined them, but they listened and Lydia – for one – believed. Here is a message that makes sense to her, of a God who can be personal to her, someone she wants to follow and commit herself to. She listened eagerly, she asked to be baptised, and her whole household was baptised too. I wonder how many of that household were excited and full of joy at this new life they were entering, and whether there were some who were simply baptised because that is what they were told to do.



I find it frustrating that, much as I love the wonderful baptisms I do, how lovely it is to celebrate with smashing people – I find it frustrating that rarely do I do a baptism of someone who has made a definite decision to follow Jesus Christ, to commit their lives to him, and to live as his disciple. I still believe it is our job, our privilege, to serve the people around us – I still believe in a parish church here for its people – though I feel more and more like a dinosaur. There are lots of people telling me that I, and churches like us, will only survive if we change

and evolve, become more mission focused and spend far less time focussing on old buildings and our community involvement, let someone else run the lunch club and the toddler group, our job is simply to make disciples.

The Parish of St Edmund
Allestree

POSTAGE REVENUE
16 2 JUNE 1953 16

50p
Solomon Island

We celebrate
Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee
with flowers and memories
in St Edmund's church

Refreshments next door at The Red Cow, and
Jubilee birds at St Matthew's Darley Abbey

Churches open 10 to 4 on Thursday 2 June,
Friday 3 June and Saturday 4 June.
On Sunday 5 June, Celebration Services at 10 am,
churches open until 4 pm.
Festal Evensong at St Matthew's at 4 pm.
Admission free, donations welcome.

100 YEARS OF THE QUEEN'S REIGN

I hope that as we come out of the last two years, we will make disciples. In our Jubilee celebrations I don't just want people to say "nice flowers" or "stunning birds", I want people to think about the faith of the wonderful lady who's Jubilee it is. I want to talk about the gift of the Holy Spirit, and how marvellous that Jubilee Sunday is Pentecost – and how that brings all of us into a closer relationship with God. I want to talk about building the Kingdom of God, and I want to encourage all of us, and the folk who will just pop in to see the flowers or the birds, that walking with God, serving God, believing in God, building the Kingdom of God, is a task for all of us. A task and a joy! Faith transformed Lydia's life – and it is a transforming power for all. Amen.

Peter Barham
21 May 2022