

Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev. Geoff Read on Sunday 26th May 2019

Acts 16:6-15

The first church in Europe was an immigrant church, founded by migrants among migrants and through the power of the Spirit of Jesus who is always on the move.

In our passage from Acts we read how it was planted in Philippi and the cast and the plot make for interesting reading

But before we look at that passage, we need to ask ourselves with what purpose did Luke write his second volume, after his gospel and with what purpose we read it today.

It was included in the canon of Scripture largely as a result of our forbears in the faith sensing that this writing had a quality beyond other religious texts, what they sensed was inspired and authoritative, to be for them and so for us the Word of God

Its like much of the OT – historical narrative

And the question is: why was it written and so how do respond to it?

Is it for us normative: a series of examples to be followed - structures for leadership and governance, ethics, worship patterns to be reproduced in the church today? The problem is that in Acts there are different patterns for different contexts

Or are we to read and follow the example of the key characters – some churches have read it like that and it has given rise to practices of everything from snake handling to ways of praying and seeking guidance

At the start of both his gospel and Acts Luke gives us a clear explanation of why he is writing.

In the case of Acts (1:1-2) he says it builds on the first book, his gospel, which was “about all that Jesus did and taught”. Only now Acts is about what happens the other side of the resurrection and ascension, and so what the Spirit of Jesus continues to do and teach, on into Acts and on into our day too

Looking at this passage is about recognising the ways this Spirit of Jesus works, what resurrection life looks like that we too may discern it and join in

In this quote from John Pollock in his book on Paul, we see how hidden and mistakable in some senses that can be as he describes the arrival of Paul and his companions in Acts 16 like this

“They did not think of themselves as passing from the continent of Asia to Europe. The terms were in use but the Aegean was Greek on either side... they were not bringing force of arms or a political programme: just four men – and Another, invisible who had known these shores before Achilles or Agamemnon or Ulysses; who could demolish empires and cities by the breath of his mouth, but who had chosen to humble himself and come to Macedonia as quietly, as weakly as, in the flesh, he had come to Bethlehem half a century before.” (p92)

Our passage starts with what seems a clear prompt by the Holy Spirit as Paul sees a man of Macedonia in vision saying “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” (16:9)

But read back a bit and you see the same Spirit prompting through frustrating what seem great ideas to head East into Asia (16:6) and then north into Bythinia (v7). But in each case, we read: we were forbidden by the Spirit and the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them

It seems plain sailing now – a wind literally propels them in two days on a journey that will take five on the way back

But as they arrive in the Roman colony of Philippi, they find none of the usual places to engage in evangelism. There is no synagogue which suggest a small Jewish population and so on the Sabbath they head out to a place of prayer

But again, in terms of the culture of that day, it all seems very unpromising, as it is only women who seem present

Why would the Spirit bring them to this place and these people?

But as Paul is invited to speak we read: READ v14

Lydia is a gentile attracted to the living God

She is from Thyatira in the kingdom of Lydia, well known for its cloth making – she is probably the local agent for a manufacturer, specialising in the expensive purple end of the market, maybe with the nickname of Lydia, and she is an immigrant

Paul travels, but it is the Lord who eventually opens the way to Philippi

Paul speaks, but it is the Lord who opens Lydia's heart

She is then baptised and those in her household too

And then, although there is no mention of the Spirit coming on the group as it had, for example, on Cornelius and his household, the Spirit seems to inspire Lydia herself as she says: "If you have judged me faithful to the Lord..." come and stay in my home

Now what can that mean – she is only just baptised

But she is a saleswoman and we read: she prevailed on us

So what do we see of this resurrection life, this Spirit of Jesus life in Acts?

At heart its about a combination of divine and human initiative with a willingness, on our part, to have a go and see what happens

So often in church we only begin something when we have weighed it up from every angle, assuring ourselves of success, risk assessing things to be the point of suffocation

Now while we must be good stewards of resources, users of common sense, preventers of irresponsible risk and preventable danger there seems to be here something entrepreneurial about the movement of God – recognising need and opportunity and acting

Indeed, its interesting that one of the attitudes and skills the Church of England is seeking to develop in new clergy, like Evelyn, who will be Incumbents is "entrepreneurial leadership" – that precise term is used

Like those who lead them we as churches are to be the successors of this entrepreneurial early church, risk takers in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the cause of the gospel

Sometimes we will succeed.

Other times the Spirit prevents and point us elsewhere

Or we simply get it wrong

And that can seem, at times, unpredictable

And it requires grace and generosity to create church cultures where we can have a go, learn from but sit light to failure and success alike

Because the fact that it worked in this way this time is no guarantee that the Spirit will work in the same way next time

And to say, “we tried that before then” doesn’t mean that it ought not to be tried again now

Mission and ministry isn’t just about good ideas – its discerning the Kairos, HS moment

This season of the Spirit in Acts was about pushing the first Jewish believers beyond being a sub-set of Judaism to engage with the gentile world in terms that made sense to that world – concepts, traditions and people

For as I began: the first church in Europe was planted by migrants among migrants

Indeed it was largely carried by migrants from Jerusalem to Rome itself

And we are seeing that same pattern today – the renewal of the Church in Europe by migrants from throughout the world whether they come for economic or political reasons

They are a gift of God blown by the Spirit in sometimes unlikely and even painful circumstances, scattered like the first believers following the death of Stephen recorded in Acts 7 & 8

We are a migrant church and all from wherever they come, must be actively enabled to play a part in all areas of church life – otherwise we risk what Paul calls quenching the Spirit (1 Thess 5:19)

Our Diocese – aka us - in our Diocesan Strategy called *Walking Together in Faith* has committed us to share in, quote, “the evangelisation of Europe”

In other words, to be individuals and churches who are actively looking for the same movement of the Spirit that we see in Acts and taking sometimes uncomfortable risks – aka steps of faith – to join in

We are currently living in one of the most rapidly secularising countries in Europe.

But we are called to be Easter people, living in the power of Spirit of the risen Jesus who specialises in turning up and transforming in new and entrepreneurial ways those situations that seem like death with His life!