

“A baptised people” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin by Kerry Enright on Sunday 27 September 2015. The readings were Ezekiel 36:24-28, Acts 16:7-15, 40; Mark 10:13-16

Some people have such an impact on us that when we hear that same name in later years, we instinctively think of them. When I hear the woman’s name Robyn, I often think of my geography teacher. When I hear the name Owen, I think of my brother Owen.

In a few minutes we will baptise Lydia. Lydia is part of our congregation. We will be seeing Lydia as she grows up, as long as her family do not move away. So today I want to link this Lydia with the biblical Lydia – to make connections in our mind so when we see Lydia we think of these things.

The figure of Lydia appears in just a few verses in the book of Acts. Those few verses seem innocuous enough. They describe what seems an obscure and minor event. The Apostle Paul and his small group – Silas, Timothy, Luke - arrive in Philippi. So what? To get there they had crossed the Dardanelles, going from Asia to Europe. Here then is passage that notes one of the most significant events in history, the entry of Christianity into Europe, an event that changed the course of Western societies.

Philippi was a proud city. About a century earlier, a great battle had been fought outside its walls. Brutus and Cassius, the murderers of Julius Caesar, had been defeated by the combined forces of Antony and Octavian who became the Emperor Augustus. The Philippians had helped, so as a reward, as a prize, Augustus granted them Roman citizenship. Because of the victory, people took great pride they were a little bit of Rome.

This visit to Philippi had an unpromising start.

In his travels, when Paul went to a city he normally went immediately to the synagogue, because there he would find fellow believers, people with some understanding of the faith. To qualify as a synagogue, there needed to be at least ten adult worshippers. Philippi was a pagan city - it seemed there were not ten adult worshippers so there was no synagogue – so Paul needed to look elsewhere. The small group went outside the gate and walked by the river, where they supposed there might be a place of prayer. And he found one. A group women had gathered by the river. So he sat down and spoke to the women gathered there.

The meeting with Lydia had an ironic twist. Paul had wanted to go to Asia, but, the Book of Acts says, the Spirit had forbidden them to go. We are not told how they were forbidden – one writer suggests that perhaps one of their party got a stomach bug or the driver never turned up or the wheel fell off the cart. Who knows? The irony is that for one reason or another he was stopped from going to the region that included Thyatira, yet when he went to Philippi, he met a person from Thyatira, Lydia.

So Lydia was not a local. A couple of weeks ago, I went into a Dunedin shop and after a few exchanges the person serving me said: “you’re not from around here.” “Where do you think I come from?” – “The North Island,” she said. Lydia knew that feeling.

Lydia was in-between. And in some ways she was also a religious in-between. She was a worshipper of God – that’s code for she was a Gentile who was a Jewish associate – religiously she did not fit into one category or another.

Nor it seems, did she fit easily into a societal category. She was a business woman who traded in purple cloth. Purple was a sign of social class and powerful status. She made a good living. She had her own home and it was large enough to accommodate Paul and his group.

She and her household are baptised. Now, it is interesting that it is Lydia’s name that is given here. Perhaps she was a widow. But it does challenge the notion a man must head the household. For here, Lydia and her household were baptised.

So in this act of baptism, in this proud Roman colony, God planted a Jesus colony. This outpost of Rome had among it an outpost of heaven. Eventually, these branches became an underground movement that crossed cities and towns and continents, and the Roman Empire was undermined. The face of Europe changed. Through groups like this, gatherings of people at the edge, outside formal structures, outside accepted networks, together forming a movement that changed Europe.

Lydia’s first act of discipleship was to offer hospitality. One of her qualities was openness, and it seems she exhibited this openness by welcoming people. That is often the gift of people who are in-between - perhaps because they sense the importance of hospitality for people who are new to a place; perhaps because they remember what it is like not to belong; perhaps because they don’t have established

patterns of living; perhaps because they have learned how to adapt to people who come among them.

It is likely Lydia was one of the first leaders of the Christian community in Philippi. It is possible her home became the centre of a new church in Philippi.

Hospitality is one of our shared ministries. Thousands of newcomers arrive every year. Many of them from other places, other nations. The offering of hospitality is one of the distinguishing marks of the Christian movement. Of hosting Paul and Silas and Timothy and Luke our way.

Lydia's hospitality expresses a deep principle of stewardship. Her home does not ultimately belong to her. The second chapter of Acts describes the coming of the Holy Spirit on the first followers of Jesus at Pentecost. It is said of those followers – All who believed were together and had all things in common. They had everything in common; a spirit of openness to each other and each other's needs.

That spirit exhibited in Lydia took hold across the Macedonia church of which Philippi was a part. Macedonia experienced extreme poverty, rock-bottom poverty. But the Macedonians heard the people in Jerusalem were in difficulty. Now the people in Jerusalem were different from the people in Macedonia. In Jerusalem, the Christians were mainly Jewish; in Macedonia the Christians were mainly Gentile. Despite the differences, despite the Macedonian poverty, their sense of belonging together in Christ was such that when Jerusalem suffered, the Macedonians were extremely generous. Acts says they gave as much as they could. That means without pressure, without badgering, of their own free choice. They gave not because it was a duty or a membership fee, but as a privilege, an act of gratitude, a response to what they had experienced of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Their concern was to serve Jesus Christ in every part of their lives.

Each year we will have some focus on stewardship for a Sunday or two. Stewardship principles are part of living the baptised life, of having everything in common.

Giving is freely done with joy, with freedom, with gratitude, with a sense of grace and blessing, with no sense of guilt. We give in freedom, in response to what we know of the goodness and abundance of God. It is about grace.

Giving comes after thinking and praying about how much to set aside each week or each month. In modern parlance, we need to budget our giving and do it regularly and freely. So it is not an afterthought, from our discretionary money, from what is left over.

Giving reflects how much we have been given. We cannot, we must not give what we do not have. We give in proportion to our income.

Lydia – this person of openness, of hospitality, of stewardship, of a movement that changed the world.