

## MARKS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

9 May 2010 (Easter 6 and Mothers Day)

**Text:**

**Acts 16: 9-15**

Two weeks ago we had as visitors here at Pilgrim a couple who were visiting from England and were stranded in Australia as a result of the cloud of volcanic ash making the skies over Europe dangerous for air travel. My brother and sister in law left Australia with a very carefully prepared itinerary for their time in the UK, but got as far as Doha in Middle Eastern Qatar and were stranded there for six days, throwing their itinerary into chaos. The best made plans sometimes fall apart.

St Paul's best made travel plans fell apart in the reading from the book of Acts today. Paul and his travelling companions, Silas and Timothy, were in Syria and as part of their missionary work planned to travel east towards Asia. They knew where they wanted to go, but they were thwarted. The way the Scripture put it is that "the spirit of Jesus did not allow them". Then Paul had a dream one night, and in the dream saw a man pleading with him to "come over to Macedonia". The end result was that instead of going east as planned, they went west sailing for two days across what we know as the Aegean Sea. They disembarked at the port of Neapolis and then based themselves in nearby Philippi city. This was the first time any of the apostles ministered in what we know as Europe.

When Paul visited a new city it was his practice to attend the local Jewish synagogue on the first Sabbath after his arrival and seek an opportunity there for making the Christian message known. At Philippi, however, there does not appear to have been a synagogue. [Just as an aside, there had to be ten men to constitute a synagogue. No number of women could compensate for the absence of even one man.] There was, however, an unofficial meeting-place on the river bank where on each Sabbath a number of Jewish women came together to pray. Paul told these women the story of Jesus, and at least one of those women, named Lydia, became a believer in Jesus and was baptised.

So there was the beginning of a church in the city of Philippi. Now out of that little snapshot I want to point to four glimpses of the life of the early church, and suggest that these four glimpses give us some clues for the future life and work of the church, not in Philippi, but in Launceston or wherever else you live.

Now, are you ready for four glimpses?

First, we have a discernment that a community needed help. In the vision Paul had he saw a Macedonian saying "come over to Macedonia and help us" It was not a formal request for help that came to Paul. Rather he was alert to where he could make a difference. So Paul went to Macedonia.

This passage reminds me of what happened to me eight years ago. Coming to Tasmania was not part of my planning for my future. I was perfectly content where I was and I felt that my ministry was going reasonably well. I was a member of the Synod's Placements Committee and as a result of the coming amalgamation of the Synods of Tasmania and Victoria a new

position to head up the Tassie office was proposed. I had assumed that a Tasmanian person would be appointed to the role. That was what made most sense in my mind. However, to my astonishment the Tasmanian members of the Placements Committee put forward my name. And the rest is history. What I heard was not “Come over to Macedonia and help us”, but “come over to Tasmania and share in this new relationship”. And I discerned that I could help and should do so.

In the early church the members and leaders welcomed all the help they could get. Everything was new and there were few if any precedents to guide them in sharing the Jesus story. There were some pleas to come and help us, but it was remarkable how different parts of the church discerned how they could help each other and did so.

Now, are we willing to ask for help? One of the things that concerns me about the church today is that each congregation seems to not only value its independence, but is reluctant to seek or accept help from other congregations and other church leaders. We are breaking that down a little in the Uniting Church across Launceston congregations, but ever so slowly. We need to identify areas of church life in which we need help and then unashamedly ask others to come and help us. At the same time we need to be intentional in thinking of ways in which we could go and help others. In not asking are we afraid that we will reveal an area of our weakness? Surely there are many ways in which we need help, and God provides us with people in other congregations and in the presbytery who can help us.

Also, as individuals we should not be afraid to ask for help – maybe in praying, maybe in learning to read the Bible, or understanding the Bible, or the creeds, or in discerning how your gifts can be used in God’s service. Don’t be scared to say “come and help me”

So my first glimpse of early church life is in the willingness of its members to help each other and to accept help from each other, even ask for help.

The second glimpse comes from that gathering of women praying on the river-bank. Gathering for prayer and to discern God’s ways was a regular feature of the early church, and over the centuries the gathering of Christians for worship has been integral in ensuring that faith and hope was nurtured and a personal relationship with God sustained.

The discipline of gathering regularly has kept many people in the faith. Coming with other Christians to worship leads to heightened awareness not only of the presence of God, but of the purposes of God, and of our place within those purposes. Now the discipline of Christians faithfully gathering for worship each week is not as common. There’s a general consensus that going to church regularly these days means once a month. It is a reality that there are now so many competing claims for our time on Sundays. But I want to impress on you all the importance of gathering in community to worship God and grow in your experience and understanding of God. A verse in a well known says “he bids us build each other up, and gathered into one, to our high calling’s glorious hope, we hand in hand go on.”

I am glad, incidentally, that Pilgrim offers a mid-week service. Many believers have other priorities on Sunday mornings. We might not agree with their priorities, but let’s make sure that our Uniting Church provides a range of opportunities for those whose priorities take them elsewhere on a Sunday morning.

The third relevant glimpse of early church life I get from the Acts 16 story relates to the leadership of women. The fact that Lydia is named is evidence that she was a well-known person in the early church. She was a business-woman, dealing in purple fabric. She clearly provided leadership in the faith community at Philippi. I'm glad that on this secular festival of Mothers Day the lectionary co-incidentally points us to a woman who was a Christian leader.

It is sad that for so many centuries the role of women in the New Testament story has been at best neglected and at worst belittled, and that that has been carried over into the life of many parts of the Christian church. I'm glad that our Uniting Church has women in positions of leadership. But lest we get too cocky, let's acknowledge that, for example, it was only in the last century that the three denominations which entered the Uniting Church ordained women.

The story of Lydia dispels the myth that in the New Testament all church leaders were male. Let us never again let that myth deceive or delude us.

The final snapshot to which I draw your attention today is the hospitality we see. Lydia was so enthralled by the story of Jesus that she was baptised seemingly that day in the river, and her first expression of gratitude was to offer hospitality to Paul and his associates. In fact, she didn't just offer hospitality. The Scripture says that she prevailed upon them to come and stay at her house.

Hospitality is not the preserve of Christians, but it is one of the hallmarks of the early Christians. St Luke who wrote not only the gospel that bears his name, but also the book of Acts was at pains to stress that the hospitable nature of God (who receives everyone) demands a hospitable attitude in the followers of Jesus.

Last Thursday I had lunch at Maggie's, and could see that Maggie's is one expression of this congregation's hospitality. There are others like our weekly morning tea, the monthly lunches, the way we invite others to use our property, but more than that there are many people in our congregation who offer hospitality to others. You don't have to be a Christian to be hospitable, but one of the marks by which others will know that we are truly Christian is the extent to which we are hospitable.

So there's four challenges for today's Christians based on just one story of the first century church:

- Be helpful to one another and be prepared to ask for help;
- Regularly gather for worship with other Christians;
- Value women (as well as men) in all expressions of leadership in the church
- Practise hospitality.

To the praise of the name that is timeless and the love that is boundless.  
Amen.

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