

Sixth Sunday of Easter Year C

Acts 16:9-15; Ps 67; Revelation 21:10. 22:1-5; John 14:23-29

In our first reading today, it is the sabbath day and Paul and Silas, newly arrived in the city of Philippi (in present-day Greece), go to the riverside where they suppose there will be a place of prayer. The word that St Luke uses for ‘a place of prayer’ could also be translated as ‘synagogue.’ In those days, the word synagogue did not necessarily refer to a building. It meant a gathering of Jewish people, especially on the sabbath day, to hear the Scriptures being read and explained and to discuss how they might maintain their identity and their way of life as God’s people. This would have been a pressing issue for the women gathered ‘down by the riverside’ in Philippi, Diaspora Jews living in a Roman colony set up for veterans of imperial wars. So, those women were doing exactly what it says in the song, ‘As I went down to the river to pray / studying about that good old way.’

Paul sits down in the shade of the trees on the riverbank and begins to talk to the women about Jesus. One of his most eager listeners is Lydia. She is described as ‘a worshipper of God.’ That most probably means that she is what the Jews would call a ‘God-fearer,’ a foreigner attracted by Jewish worship of the one God and the Jewish ethos generally. She is involved in a lucrative business selling purple cloth, a ‘high end’ commodity. There were cheaper imitation dyes made with plant extracts, but the genuine purple dye, made from the very smelly process of boiling up thousands of sea snails, was the height of luxury. Apparently, the odour of the snails lingered in the fabric, but the rich and famous put up with that because of the prestige that came with wearing sea purple that glistened in the sunlight without ever losing its colourfastness.

Lydia would have been a well-to-do woman who ran her own business. The information that ‘she and all her household were baptized’ tells us that she owned a large villa staffed by slaves and that she was either single or widowed, because she had the authority,

that the male head of the household would normally have, to dictate the religious practice of her children, if she had any, and her slaves. Reading between the lines, we gather that Paul is hesitant about taking up Lydia's invitation to come and stay at her home. It is a bit complicated. She is making more than a simple offer of hospitality. She is offering a refuge which, as it turns out, Paul and Silas will need because they are at risk of being arrested as a security threat for undermining the Roman religious practices that were believed to keep the city safe under the protection of the gods (Acts 16:21). But even more significantly than that, Lydia is offering her house as a base for Paul's proclamation of the good news about Jesus. This would mean that she would be the patron or benefactor of Paul and of those who responded positively to his preaching. It would be in Lydia's house that they would gather, especially on the first day of each week, to listen to Paul explaining how the Scriptures bore witness to Jesus, to share memories of Jesus' life and teaching, and to partake of a meal that was an experience of the presence of Jesus among them. In other words, there would be a church in Lydia's house and she would be its leader. At that time, the word 'church', like synagogue, referred to the gathering or the assembly of believers. It was not until several centuries later that a building where this happened came to be called a church.

Why Paul was so dubious about Lydia's offer we can only imagine. Was it because she was a Gentile? Did the prospect of being a client of a wealthy benefactor put him off? Or did he feel uneasy about accepting hospitality from this formidable woman, who was free to act as a leader in a way that was not typical of married women under the control of their husbands? Whatever the issue was, Lydia argues that since Paul has baptized her, he must have judged her to be 'faithful to the Lord.' It is wonderful to see this feisty woman arguing her case on the basis of rights bestowed by her baptism. Lydia prevails and a church is established in her house. Later in the story, when Paul and Silas have been arrested and eventually released, it is

to Lydia's villa that they immediately go, so that they can see and encourage all the brothers and sisters gathered there (Acts 16:40).

In fairness, we should note that the Paul we meet in the Acts of the Apostles is seen through Luke's eyes at least fifty years after the historical Paul's death. The real Paul that we know from his letters had no problem with a woman being his benefactor (See Phoebe in Rom 16:1-2) or with women being church leaders. He even refers to a woman as a fellow apostle (See Junia in Rom 16:7). And just in case you are wondering about that instruction that women should remain silent in church, that is, in the assembly of believers, a later writer inserted that into Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians. (1 Cor 14:34-36). Modern Bibles put it in brackets.

So, what has Lydia's story to say to us as a church, a gathering of Jesus' disciples here in this cathedral in Dublin. (Most of us here today have been baptised, but if you haven't you are here as a welcome guest) Like Lydia, each of us enjoys the status of being baptised. Like Lydia, we are numbered among those who are 'faithful to the Lord.' We shouldn't be shy about claiming this, even if at times our faith is a bit shaky. 'The faithful' is a traditional designation for all who belong to a church. Everyone here today belongs to this assembly of Christ's faithful. The intercessions that we are about to make are traditionally called, 'The Prayer of the Faithful.'

Through our baptism, we, the faithful, have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and in our gospel reading today Jesus, speaking to all his disciples, says something quite amazing about that gift.

'The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all I have said to you' (John 14:26).

As we listen to the reading of the gospel in our assembly, we hear Jesus' words and we learn how Jesus live, loved and served. It is over to us then to ask, how might what we have heard inspire our living, loving and serving today. And this is where the Holy Spirit comes in, reminding us of things Jesus said or did and helping us to see how

relevant they can be to the issues and challenges that we face today—the climate crisis, the plight of refugees, international tensions and war, the ongoing pandemic. Perhaps it was hearing Paul speak about how Jesus welcomed people that inspired Lydia to offer the hospitality of her house. Her story reminds us that the Holy Spirit is given to all who are baptised, all the faithful. So, like Lydia, we should offer our services. We should take initiatives and find creative and inventive ways of loving and serving that are modelled on the words and deeds of Jesus.

It might be a big thing, like offering refuge to a Ukranian family. Or something small, like offering to take on one of the ministries that members of the congregation do during our services—like reading, collecting, serving as an acolyte, welcoming, serving the coffee. Or it might be something imaginative, like what Abigail, one of our cathedral priests has done: setting up a beehive in the Cathedral grounds, a small but eloquent way in which our church is responding to God’s love for the whole creation by helping the bees to recover from the loss of habitat and biodiversity that threatens their very existence. Jesus has shown us the full extent of God’s love for the world. We hope that when people listen out for the buzz of our church’s bees they will hear an echo of that love.

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