

## 2.30pm Biblical reflection

Lydia, Paul, power, vulnerability, cost, forgiveness

### Introduction

This is a biblical reflection which will touch on a number of the issues that we have been thinking about today. It will I hope help us to put those issues into a particular biblical context and in so doing help us to reflect on what is happening to people in the gateway communities.

It is a challenging reflection because we shall be considering how we act as church in situations of change, recognising that many of us remain in those situations, we do not up sticks and move on.

Reflection is based on a reading from Acts 16 11- 40  
(someone will read)

Firstly I'd like us to think about **the context of the story.**

Philippi was an ancient town with a long history. It was the site of the defeat Julius Caesar's murderers Brutus and Cassius in BCE 42 as such it had a significant role in the Roman imperial cult. Two altars in the town mark the fact. It became a Roman colony in BCE 42 and was used as a settlement for veteran soldiers. A second influx of veterans BCE 32 sealed the prestige of the town. It was exempt from Roman governing laws, although chose to adopt many of them. It was also exempt from Roman taxes. Therefore it was a popular place for veterans to live and it was a wealthy place. A little like a modern day tax haven.

By the time Paul visited Philippi had become an important town on the land trade route from Rome to the East. The Roman elite population held power over the indigenous population from surrounding villages and towns. From BCE 31 the new aristocracy had marked out the town with new architecture and new standard of living including the use of Latin for certain business transactions rather than Greek which was spoken by everyone. It was cosmopolitan with ethnic and religious mix, it was classiest with trades people supporting the very wealthy, poverty was hidden. Much of the trade was in commerce, religious seeking and high quality goods. Those related to the original veterans imposed themselves as the dominant political economic class; farming communities were dispossessed by wealthy colonists. Again a story repeated through history. At the same time local people would not have considered themselves to be Roman because they were not subject to all the Roman laws.

Pause for a moment to consider the parallels with what is happening around us either locally or within our working contexts.

Who holds power?

Who is made to feel vulnerable?

You might like to share your thoughts with the person you are sitting next to

(5 minutes max)

Having thought a bit about the context I would like us to think about **Lydia**

Lydia was a successful powerful and influential business woman. Her name indicates the area from where she came in Thyatira. A place famous for its cloth.

The nature of her work and the standing she had within it would indicate that she was single, divorced or widowed. She owned her own house and lived in it with servants and possibly dependants – children, family members.

To be a successful business woman in one of the significant trade towns on an important trade route, established some distance from her home town would suggest that Lydia

knew her trade well and had built up a very secure reputation. She was not some back street dressmaker but an influential business woman dealing with the finest cloth and selling to the richest people. Purple cloth was only for very wealthy people or royalty. It denoted power and influence, Lydia's purple cloth came from an area renowned for its cloth so would have been of the very highest quality. She would have been rubbing shoulders daily with the rich and famous, with the elite of Philippi. She would have been highly respected by her business associates, even if that respect had been hard fought for.

So wealthy successful Lydia spends her day off by a small insignificant river with a group of women seeking an expression of faith. Lydia may have been Jewish, and joined the Jewish women in prayer, but her name would suggest that she wasn't. Either way she was actively seeking an expression of spirituality which included prayer and reflection. We already know that spirituality was a successful business in the town. Lydia found her spiritual needs met through the encounter with Christ that came about through Paul's preaching. Her response was to declare faith – through baptism and then offer hospitality.

Hospitality was a key Christian practice in the early church, it meant far more than providing a meal, it was all embracing sharing of what you had. Lydia would have shared her home with Paul and his travellers and all those who came to hear him speak day by day, night by night. It was as if she had given her home up to Paul, She would have been responding to Paul and his ministry 24/7 along with those who lived with her.

Pause to consider what kind spiritual seeking are we aware of locally?

What kind of hospitality we can offer to those who come into our communities?

Again do share with the person next to you

(5 mins max)

Lydia didn't just give up her possessions and home in order to offer hospitality to Paul. She risked her reputation. We know that Paul healed the slave girl and was hauled before the town council. He was beaten and thrown into prison, and what was his address? Lydia's house. Lydia was an established member of the community living comfortably within the town, she had excellent trade contacts, a great network and was very influential, suddenly she is giving house room to someone who threatened the fragile peace and stability of the town, threatened one of the lucrative trades of the town, threatened the cultural identity of the town. She stood by him, she didn't refuse him hospitality when he came out of prison, and his address was still Lydia's house.

Pause again to consider the cost we may be asked to make in offering hospitality to those who perhaps threaten our peace, stability, culture.

(max 5 mins)

Finally I'd like us to think about the effect of ministry in that story, both of Paul's and Lydia's. Paul established a Church in Philippi; it was the first European church. It remained extremely precious to him for the rest of his life (Read Philippians get the sense of intimacy with the people he is writing to)

Lydia's home became church. From a group of people praying outside the town to a church building within the town, there along side the other places of worship was a living church. The church was run by a business woman, it grew. It continued to support Paul in his missionary travels. The cost to Lydia was life transforming, yes it would have cost her money to house the church, but more than that it cost her herself because she gave herself. As far as we know she carried on selling cloth, but now she had a different sort of power and influence, and a different understanding of wealth and hospitality. We know that the early Christian churches were real multicultural gatherings of people from different ethnic backgrounds, different class backgrounds and different economic backgrounds. They were diverse, they were a threat to the establishment, and they were very popular,

Lydia continued to nurture the church in Philippi

Consider what kind of church are we prepared to be?

I'd like to suggest you hold in mind the things we have been thinking and discussing, because they will be useful to you in the final session of today.

Jane Winter – Church in Society ([Jane@churchinsociety.org](mailto:Jane@churchinsociety.org))