

Let's get straight into the reading today: **During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'**

This comes at an interesting juncture in the narrative.

It had been Paul's idea to go with Barnabas for a return visit

To the places where they had preached God's word:

They wanted to see how the believers were doing (Acts 15:36).

But on this trip they experienced road blocks.

It says that they were forbidden *by the Holy Spirit*

To speak the word in Asia, and that *the Spirit of Jesus*

Did not allow them to go into Bithynia (Acts 16:6-7),

It does not say *why* or *how* this happened,

Just *that* it happened, with the evident lesson being

That the Apostles *planned* the trip, but that God was *directing* it.

So, it's into this context that St Paul had the vision

Of the Macedonian man, pleading with him to come over.

Keep this in mind: when they get to Macedonia

It won't be a man *who* is first converted, but a *woman*,

And she will also *plead* with them: we'll come back to this.

Did you notice, by the way,

That this trip happens as the result of *a vision*?

Many times in the book of Acts, people have

What we would call unusual or even supernatural experiences:

In today's reading it's a vision.

Recently at church we heard about St Paul's encounter

With the risen Christ, and of St Peter raising Tabitha.

There are other unusual and even disturbing events in Acts

Such as aprons that touched St Paul healing the sick (Acts 19:12),

Or Ananias and Sapphira being struck dead (Acts 5:1-11).

In the book of Acts these things are described as simply happening

As the Gospel is preached, *but they are not the Gospel message*.

So, the apostles and the early church

Experienced things like visions and healings,

But they *preached* repentance and forgiveness of sins

In Jesus' name.

So, in Acts 5:31 we hear this summary from St Peter: **God exalted [Jesus] at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.**

And in Acts 20:21 we hear this summary from St Paul: **I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus.**

Now St Paul in today's reading has *a vision*,

What we could call a charismatic experience,

But he is going to *preach Christ*, not his vision,

And when people come to faith they are going to receive holy baptism:

So you could say that the charismatic and the sacramental,

Or the personal and the communal,
Come together in the narrative of Acts.

I think this also happens also in the church today,
As we have our own experiences of faith, of God,
That might even be so unusual or supernatural
That we are reluctant to talk about them with other people,
But we come together as one baptised people
To hear about Christ, and him crucified for us.

The reading goes on: **When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.**
Here we see the movement from the vision given personally to St Paul,
To the way this vision is tested by the community, and acted on.
They could not proclaim *as the Gospel* that it was God's will
That they should go to Macedonia,
But they together *sensed* that it was God's calling to them,
They were personally *convinced*, and they go.

Note, by the way, the use of the word 'we' here.
This is evidently the first time in the book that St Luke
Is part of the mission: before this he talks about what others did,
Now he is part of the group –
From now on in Acts we will hear St Luke write about what 'we' did.

What happens next can seem a bit redundant at first,
Like a brief travelogue that we could do without.
This is what St Luke writes: **We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days.**
It is hard to concentrate as we hear these difficult place names
Strung together in a seemingly arbitrary way.
But if you look at a map in Bible
That shows St Paul's second missionary journey,
Then you can see more easily the geographical significance
Of this event: *for the first time we have the Gospel coming to Europe.*
Earlier in Acts we read of the Gospel going to Africa,
As the Ethiopian Eunuch goes on his way rejoicing.
Here we have the Gospel going into what is, for many of us,
The place of our ancestry.

So now the Apostles, in response to the vision,
And ready to proclaim the Gospel, go to work: **On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.**
Now normally St Paul would start his work
By attending the Synagogue,

And speaking there with his fellow Jews.
It seems that Philippi, which is a Roman colony,
Settled by retired Roman soldiers and their families,
It seems that Philippi is a place where there is no Synagogue building,
And perhaps not even a quorum of men
To form the basic grouping for a synagogue.
So St Paul and his companions go *on the Sabbath*,
On the day of rest, of worship for God's people,
And they go to what they see is a *place of prayer*
And sit down, and they *talk* with the women who are there.

Now St Paul and his companions were living out their callings:
They were telling people the Good News about Jesus.
But it is not human beings, even when they are faithful to God,
Even when they are called especially by God to preach the Gospel,
It is not human beings who bring people to faith,
It is God.

This is how the reading goes on: **A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.**

Lydia is called a 'worshipper of God',
That is, she was someone who worshipped the God of
Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, without herself being Jewish.
She is also called a 'dealer in purple cloth'
Suggesting that she was a woman of means
And with management skills:
Purple cloth was used in high-end fashion.
The text makes it clear that it is *the Lord* who opens Lydia's heart
To listen to what St Paul says: to listen to the message of repentance and the forgiveness of
sins in Jesus' name.

What happens next is put in such a matter of fact manner
That it is easy for us to miss: **When she and her household were baptized...**
St Paul and his companions came to Philippi as the result of a vision,
It is the Lord who opened Lydia's heart to receive the Gospel,
And having come to faith she *receives the gift of baptism*
Together with her whole household:
Just like Paul, and just like all those who come to faith in Acts,
She is incorporated into the body of Christ just as we are:
Through the gift of holy baptism.

Note, by the way, that the *whole household* is baptised.
Although there is not an explicit example of the baptism of children
In the New Testament,
There are examples of the baptism of households,
And this is one of them.
In the ancient world the household was not simply the nuclear family,

But included a wider circle of relatives as well as any slaves.
It is likely, therefore, that children were included in this baptism.

Let's return to the text: **When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.'** And she prevailed upon us.

St Paul and his companions have come to Europe
As the result of the vision of a Macedonian *man*
Pleading for them to come and help.
And as a result of the vision they have met a *woman* in Philippi,
A *Gentile* woman, who comes to faith, together with her household.
Now she, just like the man, urges them to come and stay:
The 'urging' that she does is the same verb in Greek
As the 'pleading' that the Macedonian man had done.
But something else is going on as well.

Do you remember the account of Jesus on the road to Emmaus?
That account is also written by St Luke,
And this is what we read there: **As they came near the village to which they were going, [Jesus] walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.'** So he went in to stay with them. Luke 24:28-29

The disciples urge Jesus strongly:
This is what Lydia does with St Paul as the other disciples.
She prevails upon them,
And they take her coming to faith, her receiving baptism,
As the genuine article.
They put aside any scruples they might otherwise have
And they receive her hospitality,
Understanding that as she receives them,
She is receiving the Lord,
And they are together built up in faith.

Let's take encouragement from this passage of Scripture.
We all have different paths of life,
But it is the *one Lord* who has opened our hearts to hear his word,
It is the *one faith* that we confess in the risen Lord Jesus,
And it is the *one baptism* in which the gifts of repentance
And the forgiveness of sins are given to us.
So, let's live at peace with each other,
Open to the callings that our Lord gives us,
And united in promoting the Gospel
To the glory of God.
In Jesus' name. Amen.