

The first person to be baptised on European soil was Lydia...

Sermon on Lydia Belonging to a Faith Community

The first person to be baptised on European soil was Lydia, a prosperous merchant. A “seller of purple cloth”...

I began contemplating on the Biblical text about her by imagining her: a first century business women selling the most fascinating pieces of material to the wealthy and the beautiful of her time.

All the fabric she produced and sold was red or somehow related to red: bright and colourful as can be. Lydia lived in a world of yellows, reds, oranges and purples. She was surrounded by beauty, colour and light. To look at her standing in her shop and offering her treasures must have been a delight to the eye.

I can literally see her holding up a bright red cloth with patterns in silver, and offering it to her customers. I can imagine her calculating how much money she will earn when the woman she recommends it to, buys it and has herself one of those exciting robes made which were so fashionable in those days...

Lydia was an independent, young woman who came into the country as an immigrant and soon after traded with a luxury item for the wealthy. Her business brought to her the upper class of not only her new home town Philippi but people from all over the Mediterranean world. Lydia was well known and well off. Her business was a safe one. Her income stable. Her customers faithful and generous.

She was the head of her house. She had people who lived and worked with her in this beautiful business. She could pay them good salaries. They all lived a respectable and pleasant life.

It was certainly the bright side of life on which Lydia and her housemates lived. They had enough of everything and were enjoying the day to day encounters among each other and with their clients.

And still: Lydia wanted more. There was a longing in her heart that wealth, money and materials couldn't still.

Read Text:

Acts 16

11 We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis,

12 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.

13 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.

14 A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper 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.

15 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 so they did. They stayed.

What Paul and his companions discovered is unique in the New Testament. They met Lydia and some other women. On the Sabbath day they met a well organised group of women in the Roman colony of Philippi. These women met outside the city in a small prayer place near the river. They met together, they prayed and preached, they sang and praised God, and obviously also welcomed newcomers and strangers.

Paul and his friends were warmly welcomed and immediately became part of this small community. Paul shared about his faith, and Lydia fell in love with the new belief this stranger had to offer.

Only one of the women is mentioned by name. Her leading role is specifically emphasised, and we learn about her profession and her background. We are told where she comes from – Asia Minor - and how she earns her living in her new home in Greece.

Lydia, and maybe some of the other women, too, is a business woman.

In contrast to what would have been expected in her time and culture, Lydia is a leader at work, in her community and in her household, too.

Lydia sold purple cloth. Often several women would join together in one business and employ others. Sometimes they lived and worked together in family-like groups called “houses”.

After they'd met Paul and his friends, this whole house group was baptised at Lydia's request. In a way it formed the first Christian community in Europe. Lydia and her household were the beginning of an expanding church. They met in Lydia's home, more and more people came and joined them. There was always plenty of time for sharing and praying, lots of singing, and teaching as well: teaching of the essentials of this new faith of those who had decided to follow Jesus.

Lydia, the woman who already had a good job and friends to live with, now experienced what it meant to live in a community with those who she shared her faith with. The people of her house had become her Christian friends. The household was not only a place where they lived together but where they worshipped and prayed together. A community house had been turned into a centre of spirituality. And Lydia was the head of it. She had found the three things that were most important to her: work, community and faith.

And from all which she then learned about Jesus and his teachings she knew that the way she now lived, worked and worshipped was exactly the way Jesus would have wanted her to do it, had he still been alive. But – hang on – he was still alive. She could feel him in all that happened to them since Paul had arrived, and she knew that this was what she had always longed for: to find Jesus. Nothing more and nothing less.

The first person to be baptised on European soil was Lydia...

Lydia understood that Jesus had taught his friends to grow together and learn in community. Become who God had meant them to be not as individuals but in community.

Jesus had woven people together into a community around him and taught them stories and parables. And by doing so he helped them to develop their faith and grow in it.

What he taught changed the people around him; and it changed their relationships towards each other.

After Jesus' death the friends of Jesus had first met in the Upper Room. Later they met in various homes and temples.

They repeated the stories of Jesus, imprinting his teaching upon their hearts. The community supported them, provided the network for testing ideas, gaining from one another's experiences, sharing the love of Christ, and holding one another accountable to following Jesus.

The spiritual life, so Lydia learned, is never a lonely affair.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, intentionally organized people into small groups for the study of the Bible and prayer, and "to watch after one another in love". Early Methodists met in societies, classes and bands. They gathered in homes, workplaces and schools. They helped each other to make spiritual progress and cared for each other. They shared their doubts and hopes and talked about how they'd seen God's grace at work in their lives.

They learned to "rejoice with those who rejoice" and to "weep with those who weep". They nourished and encouraged each other.

Their desire was to become more and more like Christ. And by helping each other, they did.

John Wesley wrote: "Christianity is essentially a social religion; and to turn it into a solitary one, is to destroy it." This simply means: spiritual life needs community and cannot be learned alone.

Robert Schnase, the American bishop whose book has been my companion for many years, interprets this statement by saying: "Peace, forgiveness, mercy, compassion, hope, gentleness, love, grace, serving are components of belief. They are communal in nature. They are social and cannot be learned merely from a book. They only become part of us, as we practice them with other people."

In other words: we learn them with friends and fellow travellers on the road which Jesus has shown us. And the more we share on this journey the more we can help each other to stay committed: committed to our faith, to Christ, to God, to doing God's work in the world etc.

Following Christ in community, and that is all that our baptism and our faith are about, makes being a Christian a public commitment, and it draws us closer to the way Jesus lived.

The closer we come, and this must have been Lydia's experience, too, the more our longing for more than work and wealth is stilled.

The first person to be baptised on European soil was Lydia...

Christian friends can help us more than anything or anybody else to make it safely through difficult times. “Nothing is as disheartening as a lonely struggle...” Lydia knew that. And we know it, too.

God uses other Christians, those for example who we meet here on a Sunday morning, to sustain us through the ordinary ups and downs of life, and also through the times of extraordinary darkness and grief.

Knowing that someone prays for me fills me with new hope. Belonging to a community soothes my wounded soul and helps me heal. Being with fellow Christians makes me strong where life otherwise could so easily break me.

I imagine that Lydia’s baptised household was the place and the source of trust, confidence and love. She felt connected, not only through the work they did, but through the faith they shared: bread and wine, sorrow and pain, love and joy.

“Never underestimate the power of a community to help,” writes Robert Schnase. This must be what Lydia always knew and what she received through her baptism: a community that helped!

May we all – baptised or not – have this knowledge, too. May it carry us through in bright and dark times.

God is with us.

God’s presence reaches us through the people who genuinely love us, who care for us, who open for us their hearts and houses, just as Lydia did almost 2000 years ago.

Let’s follow in her footsteps and let us, with her at our side, discover the beauty of a life with the living God.

Amen.

Statement of Interdependence

I do not stand alone
but with others to support me
I will stand my ground

I do not see the way
but with others to walk with me
I can make my path

I do not possess the truth
but with others to witness to what they know
I will be able to discern what is right

I cannot master all skills
but with others who will lend their accomplishments
I can do enough

I cannot carry every burden
but with others to share it
I may bear my own load

The first person to be baptised on European soil was Lydia...

I cannot meet all needs
but with others to nourish and replenish me
I will be able to give enough

I do not have limitless choice
but with others to consult
I will make my own choices gladly

I will not always be consistent
but with others to laugh with me
I will regain my equanimity

I am not invincible
but with others to reach out a hand
I may learn from my mistakes and start again

I cannot be perfect
but with others to make up the shortfall of my imperfections
I can content to be good enough.
Amen.