

## Acts 16:9-15 Sermon

Today's reading is part travel diary, part supernatural vision and part biography of a particular woman in Philippi. It reads a bit like an entry in the Lonely Planet guide or TripAdvisor at points, but there's an important thread running through it, and also through the chapters around it in Acts. Today, we will be picking up this thread and talking about the mission of the Church back then and what we can learn from it today.

We often hear the word 'mission' thrown around in churches; we make plans of how to best spread the news of Jesus around Menston, we run events at Kirklands, we make our services as accessible as we can so that newcomers feel able to participate, we talk all the time about living out our faith and being ready to talk to those around us about it without bashing them over it. Today's reading is more on a higher strategic level than that, so there's lots still to learn.

Beginning back just before our reading, over the summer of AD49, Paul and his colleagues had been travelling around strengthening gatherings of believers, and then we have a couple of intriguing verses immediately before our reading:

*They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.*

Paul and his colleagues it seems were not only somehow forbidden by God to preach in Asia, but then also God stopped them going to somewhere called Bithynia. It's really interesting for us to see even the apostle Paul stymied in his efforts. You can imagine him and his colleagues sitting in the local tavern planning their next move, completely confused and getting increasingly down-hearted. Every time they think they have a plan, it falls around their ears.

How they were doing their discernment, we don't know. But finally we get to today's reading and Paul has a vision, they discuss it, act on it, and then after an episode with a wealthy tradeswoman from Philippi, they establish a base for their future missionary endeavours which leads, eventually, to the evangelisation of Europe – something we are, I'm sure, very grateful for!

So back to the start – after all the set-backs, which are reported to us as the Holy Spirit's road-blocks, but may have even been day-to-day circumstances that the apostles interpreted as such, Paul finally has his vision. We can be sure that they were all praying for guidance at the time, but also trying things out – hence the roadblocks. That, I hope, is the same culture we have here at St John's – we are committed to spreading the Good News of Jesus, and we'll try things out, make decisions, but always be prepared for failure or roadblocks to show us that we need to abandon that plan and try something different.

Paul's vision is of a man pleading for him to help. There's two things which are important here. One is that the vision is received by Paul, but then obviously discussed with his colleagues. Verse 10 says that they were convinced that God had called them. The verb for convinced means 'to come to the conclusion' and carries with it the assumption of rational reflection. In theory, Paul could have just eaten a bit too much cheese before going to bed that evening, so even this vision is tested out in rational debate with his friends. This, it seems, doesn't represent a lack of faith that they didn't just accept Paul's word for it straight away, but it is a realisation that our rational faculties are an important part of discerning God's will. God calls, but part of discerning this call is the faithful use of rational judgment and friendship.

For the mission of Paul and his colleagues there was God's vision, but in partnership with human discussion. They came to the conclusion that God was sending them to Macedonia, and set out immediately. Once decided, there was no hanging around. In churches, and with our Christian lives, procrastination is a killer of calling. The number of people we speak to in the other side of my job who have felt a call from God but sat on it for years, and now it's too late, is huge. It's incredibly sad. But the same is true on a church-scale. If the church discerns a call from God, we should get on and do it – so many churches have a vision statement, but never quite get around to carrying it out. There's always some other pressing concern, or the need for financial stability or more people, and so on. This isn't to say that good governance isn't important. But it is to say that we shouldn't let our need for security and organisation stifle our response to God's call.

The second important thing to note from this vision is that the Macedonian asks for help. The word for help here means 'assistance in time of need.' It's the kind of word we'd use of us providing food for the homeless, or homes for refugees. So, when you think about it, it's actually an odd word to use for an appeal to Paul and his colleagues. What can they do to help the Macedonians? None of them are rich – they are itinerant preachers dependent on the good will of the people. Paul says elsewhere that he's learned to go without during his ministry. What is it that the Macedonian in the vision thinks he can receive that is useful from Paul?

This request for help leads the friends to come to the conclusion that God has called them to proclaim the Good News to Macedonia. The Good News of Jesus is all they have to offer. Whether we believe it or find it easy to process, the practical help that the Macedonian man is requesting equates to the Good News of Jesus. The Gospel is the aid package required.

This is a very different concept for us. We tend to view religion as a very personal choice, one which is more like a hobby or a lifestyle rather than an aid package or a fulfilment of basic need. The Macedonian man asks for assistance in time of need, and received the Good News of Jesus. I don't want to overstate this, because we are also aware that elsewhere in the Bible it talks of the need for faith to be backed up in real-life actions, but I do want to challenge us, that there are people in our world, in our village and maybe in our friendship groups, who need the Good News of Jesus. Maybe they don't realise they need it, but they do. Maybe it is hidden just beneath a veneer of everything being fine, but deep down they are just waiting for us to tell them about Jesus and the difference he makes to us and to the world. It's not an optional life choice. It's an aid package, which, if we withhold it, is damaging to those close to us.

This is the same personally as it is corporately. The Macedonian man in the end represented the whole of Europe. Ironically, it was through a woman that this vision of a man became initially fruitful; but as a Church, we have a whole village, country, continent and planet, who are crying out to be sent the aid package of Christ. If we withhold it because of some social quibble, or because we don't feel like we have our package in order yet – maybe we haven't tied it up properly with all the bells and whistles of knowing all the answers or having the perfect lives ourselves – we are abandoning those in need. The Gospel isn't just an add-on extra. It is aid for the spiritually hungry, comfort and rest for the anxious and disillusioned, clean, pure water for those who are thirsty for something more in life, shelter for the restless soul, and healing for the oppressed in spirit.

I leave you with this thought. What if this Macedonian vision is also ours? There stands a person of Menston pleading with us and saying, 'Come and help us.' In the words of our reading, what if when we saw the vision we immediately tried to cross the threshold of church over to Menston, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to them. Amen.