**Sharing Jesus in New Places. May 29 2022 Acts 16**

In our world today, I would expect all of us understand somewhat better than we did a few years ago, just what it is like to have our plans derailed. Holidays, special celebrations, even just dinner with friends have needed to be adjusted, cancelled or re-scheduled over the past two years.

In the story we have just heard Paul has his plans dramatically altered by the guidance of God’s Spirit. He had told Barnabus that he planned to visit various places in Asia, but then God’s spirit kept re-directing his course, primarily by prohibiting him from entering various cities. This resulted in a most unusual route, travelling several hundred miles, and ending up in Macedonia.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 Our journey through life can be quite convoluted, with times of significant uncertainty, disappointments and unexpected changes in direction. Much of this journey may evolve as we explore various options and discern what direction we should take. However, at certain periods we may need to make a pivotal decision, and we may need more convincing evidence of the path we should take.

**A New Direction**

The early Christian church had been expanding, new churches were commencing as the message of Jesus spread throughout neighbouring cities. However, at this time, Paul was about to be guided to take the message of Jesus into Europe. This was a major new direction. Such significant changes were often communicated to prophets and leaders in Israel through more dramatic means, such as visions, signs or an audible voice. In this case Paul has a vision one night. It seems that sometimes God is able to communicate something through our subconscious mind which we may be unintentionally resisting in our conscious or unconscious mind.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The vision came to Paul, but before it was acted upon, we read that the vision was owned by the group, they were convinced that God was calling them to Macedonia. A process of group discernment appears to have occurred. “What is put forward as divine guidance needs to be tested before it can be received as divine guidance.”[[3]](#footnote-3) We benefit for the discernment of others, we seem to recognise this innately and hence often seek out advice from others, when making major decisions.

As we read the book of Acts we see that these early followers of Jesus had an expectation that God would communicate clearly with them so that they knew what to do and where to go. Convinced of the direction they should take, Paul and his companions responded quickly, the words and tone of this man from Macedonia communicated powerfully that this was a matter of urgency. The people of this area were ready and receptive now.

**Flexibility**

Saul and his companions needed to remain flexible in their response to the leading of God. Though he was called by a man from Macedonia, and they go into Macedonia, he ends up speaking first to a woman from Thyratira, an Asian woman, almost certainly a Gentile, but one who feared God and had been following the faith of the Israelites.

When they arrived, it seems that Paul and his companions took some time to familiarise themselves with the city and to seek to locate a synagogue. A synagogue required the involvement of ten male Israelites, smaller groups could not meet in this way, but could meet informally for prayer and discussion. It appears that this was what Lydia and her companions were doing down by the river. Lydia was attentive and open to God so she readily responded to Paul as he shared the good news of Jesus. Her response was made tangible through baptism and through her enthusiastic hospitality to Paul and his companions. She went on to host the early gatherings of the church in Philippi. Hospitality and responsiveness to God often seem to go together.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Opposition**

Paul continued to go to the place of prayer regularly. However, he provoked some opposition, a slave girl engaged in fortune telling perceived his God given calling and her outbursts regarding this annoyed Paul to the point where he exorcised a demon from her. This provoked further opposition to Paul from her owners. They made false accusations against Paul and Silas to the local authorities and triggered them being stripped, beaten, imprisoned and restrained in stocks. The message of Jesus often upsets people, its practical ramifications can upset people’s businesses. Jesus told his followers to expect opposition, and that has been the experience of Christians over the ages. The form of opposition varies in different times and places, but Jesus clearly declared that following him wholeheartedly would be costly.

**Choices in Hardship**

Hardship however does not need to overwhelm us. We have choices regarding how we approach the challenging times in life. Paul and Silas chose to sing and pray in the middle of the night whist in prison. They were overheard by other prisoners and they were not forgotten by God. Suddenly an earthquake released their chains and opened the prison doors. Again they faced a choice. Remarkably they chose to remain there and somehow persuaded the other prisoners to also remain. This choice had an amazing effect on the prison guard. Never expecting this could happen he was ready to take his own life rather than face the consequences of his prisoners having escaped. Paul and Silas save his life through not escaping. Overwhelmed by this experience, he rushed into their cell and trembling fell down before them. What a scene! The choices we make in a time of hardship not only effect our own resilience, but also have an impact on those around us, those observing us, even those we may are unaware of.

The guard sought Paul’s advice through his well known question, *“What must I do to be saved?”[[5]](#footnote-5)* Paul wisely pointed him to Jesus. *“Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household*”[[6]](#footnote-6) he replied. The guard likewise affirmed his response through baptism, service through treating their wounds and hospitality towards Paul and Silas.

**The implications**

So as we consider what God calls us to in sharing Jesus with our communities, these stories in Acts can be helpful to us.

They remind us about the importance of our openness to God and our expectation that God will guide us, sometimes by blocking the way we intended to go and sometimes by communicating with us very clearly and perhaps in new and surprising ways.

They remind us that we can start with the people with whom we have something in common. Like Paul started with the Jewish communities. They remind us of the importance of regular prayer, and having a place where we can go to pray.

This story also alerts us to the reality that the message of Jesus often provokes opposition, we should not expect an easy path, unjust suffering can be common. However it also challenges us to look at how we choose to respond to hardship. It reminds us of the value of singing praise to God and praying.

The stories also encourage us to demonstrate our faith through hospitality and service, and to be ready to point people to Jesus when they have questions.

1. James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1996) 217 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1996) 218 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1996) 218 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck, et al (Ed) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2002) 231 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Acts 16:30b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Acts 16:31a NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-6)