

Worshipping God Together : Apart  
Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2022 at 10.30am  
Church; Physically Distanced but Spiritually United  
Worship Prepared by Rev. Janine Atkinson

## A Call to Worship God

Our Lord is the God of all time and all people.  
He will be gracious to us and bless us.  
God's face will shine upon us.  
His saving power will be known among all nations.  
Come, to praise God and sing his song of grace.

Hymn – MP 315: *Francis Harold Rowley (1854-1952)*

I will sing the wondrous story of the Christ Who died for me -  
how He left the realms of glory for the cross of Calvary.  
Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story of the Christ Who died for me -  
sing it with the saints in glory gathered by the crystal sea

I was lost, but Jesus found me, found the sheep that went astray,  
raised me up and gently led me back into the narrow way.  
Days of darkness still may meet me, sorrow's path I oft may tread;  
but His presence still is with me, by His guiding hand I'm led.

He will keep me till the river rolls its waters at my feet:  
Then He'll bear me safely over, made by grace for glory meet.  
Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story of the Christ Who died for me -  
sing it with the saints in glory gathered by the crystal sea

## Approaching God in Prayer

Loving God,  
as I come to you in this, my place of prayer and worship,  
I pray for those gathered in their special places,  
wherever they are in the world – in ones and twos; tens and twenties;  
or hundreds and thousands.

May our praise and our prayers overspill into the streets and the cities,  
the fields and the lanes, so that a continual chorus of thanksgiving  
will echo in every corner of the earth,  
and your name be exulted in all the world.

God of heaven, you have made your home on earth.  
Through Christ you showed us your face,  
by your Spirit, you dwell among us and you are one with us.  
Highest in all creation, you live amongst the least.

You journey with the rejected and you welcome the weary.  
Whenever we turn towards you, you invite us  
to drink the water of life, to be filled with good things,  
and be warmed by the fire of love....

And I invite you *now* to come and live within me and in this place,  
to stretch out your hand again in power and in compassion.

Command the peace that will still my fears  
and renew my trust in you,  
fill my heart with wonder and awe.

Inspire me, motivate me, excite me,  
travel with me through storm and stillness;  
doubt and faith; life and death.

Remind me again and again that you are Lord of all  
and that your hand reaches out  
to bring about your kingdom of welcome.

I reach out my hand to you in prayer now  
as I pray in the words Jesus  
taught...

*Our Father, who art in heaven...*

[New Testament Reading](#)

[Acts 16: 9 – 15](#)

<sup>9</sup> 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.'

<sup>10</sup> 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.

### **The Conversion of Lydia**

<sup>11</sup> We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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.

**Hymn – R&S 489: MP 51:** *Ancient Irish poem tr. Mary E. Byrne (1880-1931) and  
leanor H. Hull (1860-1935) altd.*

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,  
naught be all else to me, save that thou art —  
thou my best thought in the day and the night,  
waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,  
thou ever with me and I with thee, Lord;  
thou my great Father, thy child let me be,  
thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;  
be thou my dignity, thou my delight,  
thou my soul's shelter, and thou my strong tower;  
raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise,  
thou mine inheritance, now and always;  
thou and thou only, the first in my heart,  
High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright sun,  
grant me its joys after vict'ry is won;  
heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

## Reflections

Do you ever have dreams? I do!

We talk about 'following our dream' and about how it's our 'dream' to do or be this or that. Sometimes we follow our 'dream' – and it's hard work to be, or to do that thing we dreamed of. But frankly, sometimes – in fact, more often than not – dreams are a bit weird and difficult and uncomfortable. But dreams are one of the signs of divine initiative and communication in the Book of Acts. And, to be honest, following Jesus is often difficult, uncomfortable – and sometimes a bit weird!

Paul, Silas, and Timothy were frustrated in their plans to travel either south or north, arriving instead in Troas, on the western shore of what is now Turkey.

They accepted this frustration as the work of the Spirit, as the Apostle Paul is called by a Macedonian man in a dream to cross the sea from Turkey to Macedonia (northern Greece), to visit Europe for the first time. He is led by the Holy Spirit to the Greek city of Philippi, a Greek city at the heart of a Roman colony in the Roman Empire.

Paul travels to Philippi, and on the sabbath he finds a 'place of prayer' by the river, rather than a synagogue, an open-air meeting place. We know that Jews liked to meet by running water.

One of the women there is Lydia. She is from Thyatira, in Asia Minor, a centre of cloth making and dyeing. As a 'dealer in purple cloth' (or as I

like to call her 'Lydia; the purveyor of purple cloth' – I like alliteration!) she sells the produce of her home city. Lydia was a business-woman, an independent and influential figure working at the top end of the market in northern Greece and Philippi, her home, or 'stop off' dwelling.

Like Cornelius, whose story is in Acts, chapters 10 and 11, she was a Godfearer, a Gentile 'worshipper of God'. Perhaps she had come to recognise in Judaism something powerfully attractive and wise which wasn't on offer in the normal hurly-burly of pagan ritual and belief. Perhaps she was attracted to the synagogue by its values and beliefs. Perhaps she was even a benefactor to the small Jewish community.

Acts tells us how people like her, people on the fringes of the synagogue, provided a rich seam of converts to the 'Jesus movement'.

Luke (the writer of Acts) tells the story of Lydia's conversion extremely simply, 'The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul'. In other words, her heart was opened to pay attention to, give assent to, to believe what Paul was saying.

Verse 15 suggests that Lydia was the *head* of her household because, as she opened her heart she was baptized *with* her household. And thus, the church in Philippi was founded, the first in Europe. The first Christian Church in Europe was founded by and is likely to have been led by a woman! (Read about them in Paul's letter to the Philippians).

In Lydia was someone who had been praying, seeking God, opening themselves to the possibility that *God* might just be seeking *them*. Maybe it was through Lydia's prayers that Paul had received his vision in Troas. Whatever it was that Paul said to Lydia, he was tapping at a window that was already open, and into her heart came the light of the message of the Lord and she and her household were baptised!

Now, Baptism in a river by the city gate anticipates the vision in Revelation of the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God through the holy city with the ever-open gates.

Lydia's baptism would have made quite an impression on the community. And by accepting her hospitality Paul (like Peter) crosses more than geographical boundaries in the name of Jesus.

This story illustrates Paul's missionary strategy to the Gentiles. He is open and responsive to God's initiative. First of all, he sees Gentile converts – such as Lydia – as members of an enlarging Israel, whose identity is defined, not by the traditional Jewish boundary markers, but by faith in the crucified and risen Jesus. Paul's ministry is making the astounding claim that God's covenant with Israel is not abandoned, but fulfilled and forever being renewed in the Messiah Jesus.

Through his work in the hearts and minds of the Apostles, God is reaching out to all people through the Jewish nation, Israel, and God's chosen people become a growing group.

Jesus is in fact the Word of God, relevant to all humanity - Jew and Gentile and anyone on the fringes. People with doubts and hesitation – people like us. People like people we know.

So, who do you know who might be praying, seeking God, opening themselves to the possibility that God might be seeking them?

Whose life has a window already just open enough for the light of Christ and therefore God's light to shine in? I leave that with you for a conversation with God – and then maybe with that person.

I pray that through Jesus, God will give you courage and wise words to be God's word of light and life to those you know – those with the window open - just a crack! Amen

### [A Prayer of Praise and Thanksgiving](#)

God of faith and adventure,  
for the Book of Acts, we praise you;  
for the witness and courage of Paul, we praise you;  
for the faithfulness and generosity of Lydia, we praise you;

for the challenge of her story, we praise you;  
for the legacy of your people, we praise you;  
for all those who inspire us today, we praise you;  
In the name of Jesus Christ, we praise you. Amen.

### Hymn – MP 554: *Anon*

Peace is flowing like a river, flowing out through you and me;  
flowing out into the desert, setting all the captives free.

Joy is flowing like a river, flowing out through you and me;  
flowing out into the desert, setting all the captives free.

Faith is flowing like a river, flowing out through you and me;  
flowing out into the desert, setting all the captives free.

Hope is flowing like a river, flowing out through you and me;  
flowing out into the desert, setting all the captives free.

Love is flowing like a river, flowing out through you and me;  
flowing out into the desert, setting all the captives free.

### Holdíng the World ín Prayer

Take a piece of cloth (e.g. a large handkerchief) and tie a knot in each corner to represent four people, or situations that you want to pray for during the coming week.

As you do this now, and then each day, take the cloth and say:

God of the four corners of the world,  
I entrust to you those on my heart.... (*name them*)  
Bless them with the riches of your love  
and draw them closer to you this day.  
In Jesus' name. Amen.

Perhaps now you could also pray for equality; truth; connections;  
reconciliation; trust; openness and new beginnings  
for all nations, neighbourhoods and neighbours.

Keep a silence as you remember the hurting places before God....

Amen

Hymn – R&S 574: MP 178: *James E. Seddon. (1915-83)*

Go forth and tell! O Church of God, awake!  
God's saving news to all the nations take:  
proclaim Christ Jesus, Saviour, Lord and King,  
that all the world His glorious praise may sing.

Go forth and tell! God's love embraces all;  
he will in grace respond to all who call:  
how shall they call if they have never heard  
the gracious invitation of His word?

Go forth and tell! The doors are open wide:  
share God's good gifts – let no one be denied;  
live out your life as Christ your Lord shall choose,  
your ransomed powers for his sole glory use.

Go forth and tell! O church of God, arise!  
Go in the strength which Christ your Lord supplies;  
go till all nations His great name adore  
and serve him, Lord and King forever more.

### Closing Words and Blessing

Take the baton of hope with you this week - and pass it on.

Take the baton of faith - and pass it on.

Take the baton of peace - and pass it on.

Take the baton of openness to God's Holy Spirit - and pass it on.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore. Amen

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