

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 12 MAY 2013
Rev. Deacon Jenny Preston
Acts 16: 9-15

“Welcomed News”

What does the colour purple mean to you? What does it say? Perhaps those of us brought up before 1960 would think of purple as the colour of the robes of the kings and queens we saw in the women's Weekly glossy coronation pictures --- costly, very costly velvet robes. Maybe it makes you think of the first line from that poem by Jenny Joseph - "when I am an old woman I shall wear purple, with a red hat, which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me – and maybe I should practice now so people won't be surprised.....".

My son Mark – he loved purple when he was a boy – purple bedspread, purple chair, purple bean bag, purple lambswool. My grandson is into purple just now, or perhaps the glory of the colour purple -- that line in the movie when Shug Avery says: - possibly about a paddock full of Patterson's curse, or Salvation Jane weed, "I think it really annoys God to bits if you walk past a field of purple and don't notice it!" And we use the colour purple in liturgical colours to designate mourning, as well as connecting royalty with Christ's resurrection and sovereignty. These days we're used to being able to get any colour we want – at the paint shop, in the fashion shops.

The dye for purple was made from a juice found in minute quantities in shellfish – the Murex snail. It took thousands of crustaceans to make a yard or two of purple cloth. Gathering all those crustaceans made the dye very expensive, worth its weight in silver it was said.

A few weeks ago we recalled how Peter, in Joppa, had a vision of every type of animal which could be eaten – and how Cornelius, a gentile, a Centurion of the Roman army, came to him, pleading with him to be baptized and to come and eat at his house. A tough ask for Peter, a new way of thinking. That was one of the deciding events when the followers of the Way of Jesus realized that the Holy Spirit was taking them on a much wider journey!

Imagine yourself in Antioch – hanging out with a whole crew of first century evangelists! Lots of preaching and teaching and baptizing; Paul gets the idea that he and Barnabas should re-visit the groups of believers across Asia Minor (from the first missionary journey) – but he and Barnabas had a bust-up over John Mark (who had been a nervous evangelist on the first tour). Result was that Barnabas and John Mark went across to Crete, and Paul and Silas set off across Turkey; calling with success at Derbe and Lystra, then stopping nowhere until over on the west coast at Troas.

I've always liked verse 9 of Acts chapter 16: "Come over to Macedonia and help us". I've always had the verse in picture form in my memory. Perhaps we all long for a clear call, dream or summons. Dreams and visions – not to be discounted. So Paul, Silas and Timothy set off on a journey across the Aegean sea to the Macedonian region – and the city of Philippi.

Why is Lydia? (The name Lydia – comes from a Greek word meaning 'woman of Lydia'.) She is a 'dealer in purple cloth', a profession that may explain her being the head of her own household and business. And that's what Lydia is selling. She's selling purple; purple cloth, purple robes, the power of purple. She's not local. She's from Thyatira, a town in the region of Lydia, (now called Akhisar in modern Turkey) well known for making purple cloth. The artisans from Thyatira and Colossae had discovered how to create purple dye from the root of common shrubs known as madder. Their purple cloth would be produced at less cost, thus increasing the profit and market for dealers such as Lydia! (Thyatira is well known nowadays for its tobacco and olive crops.)

Lydia is not Jewish, but she believes in God. She's what the Jews knew as a 'Godfearer' - someone who worships in the synagogue, but hasn't converted completely to Judaism. Perhaps Lydia was already a senior person in leadership in that community and will have become the foundation member of the Christian congregation there. Perhaps her successful trade gave her money and influence and illustrated her business and leadership skills. Lydia is a woman from Asia, who becomes the first woman converted in Europe! She may have become one of the first leaders of a Christian congregation - a woman leader. (Lydia is a great favourite of Orthodox Christians. Look up some of the many icons of Lydia on the web – all slightly different, but all wearing purple.

We're aware from Acts that the apostles and evangelists normally went to a synagogue in any Roman-governed town – to preach or teach. But to have a synagogue you need ten men who will meet together to say prayers. Phillipi, it seems, doesn't have a synagogue. If there's no synagogue, then any Jews that happen to be in the town or passing through know to meet near the river on the sabbath to pray. That's where Lydia goes, and it's where Paul, Timothy and Silas go too. And there Paul meets Lydia. Lydia who has had her heart opened by the Holy Spirit, so that she can hear the message of God. Remember this verse: "The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul."

It is difficult, sometimes embarrassing we feel, to talk to people about our faith. We get tongue-tied, we feel foolish, we feel that no-one could possibly be convinced by what we have to say. And that's quite right, they can't. But they can have their hearts opened by the Spirit, just waiting for us to put into words, or better still into actions, the meaning of their faith in Jesus. We don't have to convert people, the Spirit does that. All we have to do is speak honestly and openly about what faith means for us.

Christianity Re-Discovered was a pivotal book for me during my time of study. It tells of the story of Vincent Donovan, a spiritual Catholic priest engaged in mission work to the Masai in Tanzania. The usual, the 'normal' practices of evangelism didn't bring any converts. It was only when Donovan went to the Masai villages, not expecting them to come to the Mission, that he began to realize the people were waiting, had an eagerness to know more about the God they felt was behind the high mountains, he was able to chat about the stories of Jesus' life, death and resurrection with them. The Masai began to work out ways in which they could express their response to this great news – they found ways which were not the 'orthodox catholic' way of celebrating the Last Supper; cattle are their greatest treasure, so milk reminds them of the Cup which Jesus shared with his followers..

My husband John is currently having a number of opportunities to talk about his faith: he asked the chaps who work alongside him in the factory at Chatham to help him cut the palm branches for Palm Sunday. "Why do you Christians want palm branches?" "Well, Jesus is a different sort of king, not coming into Jerusalem in a royal entourage like Pilate – he is a humble king". (*The Last Week* – Borg & Crossan). I suppose the fact that the boss/owner calls John their 'resident Christian' has something to do with the questions; a new member of staff, watching John make and pack a crate with the latest laptops donated by the Synod, for Zambian ministers, was moved to say: "you'll get to heaven", to which John said positively: "well, I'm convinced we all go to heaven if we want to."

My post-graduate study has been in Spirituality and Ageing, studying at Charles Sturt University in Canberra. In the 2 ½ years I've been in this congregation I've felt a strong desire to find a way to communicate my belief in the importance of spirituality, particularly as we age. I discovered, to my surprise and delight, that our Synod Aged Care Unit, feels the same way.

We're well underway now in the planning for an all-day Seminar entitled "Positive Ageing – abundant life in older age" which we will host here on August 31st. Our former President Rev Alistair Macrae, is right into the planning with us. So is Janet Wood, wife of D'Arcy Wood, and Chair of the Council for Ageing. It's exciting, it may well be the vehicle the wider church uses to connect with the baby-boomers, and their relatives. It's based on two of my favourite verses: John 10: 10 – "Jesus said: ***I am come that they may***

have life, life in abundance", and from Romans 8: verse 19: "***the whole of creation waits, and longs for all creation to experience the fullness of life***". Chat with Penny or Diane – or Nell or Tarn. they are part of it!

When, through the story of Dorcas, we heard from Lesley, and Rob, and Arthur, you heard their stories of responding to a call – "a man from Macedonia" got into their heart and soul, and the result is their dedication to a vision of abundant life for other people in the name of Jesus. More people are knitting now. Keep the eyes of your heart open: the news of grace and inclusion might be seen or heard through you, and welcomed, as Paul's message was welcomed by Lydia.

Lydia, the seller of purple. Is this just a story of Lydia and Paul, or is it more? The Book of Acts is a journey; a journey of the gospel from Jerusalem to Asia, (or Asia-Minor as we knew it in Sunday School) and then on to Rome. And here, near the middle of the story, as Paul leaves Asia for the first time, he meets Lydia the seller of purple.

Purple wasn't just an indicator of wealth. It was a symbol of political power. The more important you were as a Roman senator, the more purple decoration you had on your tunic and your toga. The emperor, and only the emperor, would wear a toga made entirely of purple cloth. Purple was the colour of the Roman elite.

And here, as the message of the gospel crosses the Aegean and moves towards the heart of the Graeco-Roman world, here the imperial purple and the message of the kingdom of God meet. Amen