

## Easter 6 Year C 2022

There is hardly a week goes by that we don't hear something about our Border Forces - boats in the Channel, arrests and deportations, and now the scandalous threat that asylum seekers will be transferred to Africa, like unwanted jetsam washed up on our shores. Appalling, appalling, appalling. And yet today we have, or should have, a story of the Border Forces working for the good. Yet once again the people who decide what we read on Sunday morning have let us down. To understand the first reading we really need to start three verses before our reading begins - so here they are. 'They', that is Paul, Timothy and Silas, '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, and then we read 'during the night Paul had a vision . . .' where our reading begins today. Paul is on his second missionary journey - together with a man called Silas he is visiting and encouraging the churches he and Barnabas had planted earlier - but after they had done that, where to go? They planned to go east to the Roman province of Asia, but they

were forbidden to do that by the Holy Spirit - what that really means we don't know but they certainly felt that that was not what God wanted them to do. God was being the Border Force. They decide to go to Bithynia but God refuses them a visa - you can't come here. It isn't the pagans or the Romans or the refusing Jews who won't let them preach there - it is God. What are we to make of that? We can only assume that God has something else in mind for Paul and his companions - nothing less than a mission to Europe! 'Come over and save us' says the Macedonian man in Paul's vision - and so the three, plus Luke it appears, set out on a journey which will change the whole history of the church. Paul crosses the sea from the eastern Mediterranean to Europe - forbidden to go to Asia he brings the gospel to Europe - and to a small group of women gathered on a river bank outside the Roman colony of Philippi - gathered on the Sabbath to worship the God of Israel. The only one for whom we have a name is Lydia, a 'God-fearer' - that is a Gentile with an attraction to the God of the Jews. We presume some if not all of the other women are Jewish. They have gathered together on the banks of the river, and Paul comes to them where they are. Normally, in a new city, Paul would go to the synagogue and begin

his preaching there, but the Holy Spirit brings him to the river bank and to a group of women - would you believe it? He has had a vision of a man in Macedonia saying 'come over and save us' - and ends up by a river bank with a mixed group of gentile and Jewish women, gathered outside the city gates to worship the God of Israel. What on earth is he doing there - or perhaps, what in heaven's name is he doing there? 'Come over and save us', says the man and prompted by the Spirit he goes, and meets someone ready, eager, to receive his message - Lydia - a Gentile woman who becomes the first Christian convert in Europe, and through her he finds a base for his mission to Philippi - 'come to my house'. How could he refuse?

We saw last week (the story of Peter baptising and eating with the household of Cornelius) how the barriers Jewish Christians had erected around themselves were brought tumbling down by the actions of the Holy Spirit as Peter and his companions broke bread with the Gentile household of Cornelius. Now, as Paul travels to Europe, his mission brings the church into a greater diversity of culture and religious practice. Believers gather together, often with people they would not normally associate with; the uniformity of the early church in Jerusalem is lost in

this mission field - the missionaries are taken outside the circle of the known and comfortable, into a cultural openness that is way beyond the point of view of a single region or ethnic background. People of distinctly different backgrounds are often brought together in Luke's story of the early church, as barriers of class, language, race or geography are overcome. Of course there will be disagreements; they will fall out with each other - isn't that one of the reasons God sends the Comforter, the Advocate, the Great Lawyer - to help them sort out their differences - amicably?

Why are we always so eager to re-erect those barriers?

If Paul had said 'No way, I'm not going to Europe - you're not one of us'; there would have been no mission to Europe.

If the Jewish women who met for prayer had refused to let Lydia join them, she would have had no encounter with Paul.

If Lydia had refused to listen to this unknown foreigner or if Paul had refused to talk to women, the first Christian congregation would not have been planted in Lydia's house - the place where Paul and Silas found refuge after being beaten and imprisoned - an imprisonment which led to another household being baptised.

So many 'ifs' - so many coincidences - or the prompting of the Holy Spirit, amongst people prepared to listen and take note? Both the reading from the Acts of the Apostles and the Psalm which followed it proclaim that the Gospel is not ours to keep, but to give away. God's intention is far wider than our blinkered vision. Paul's trip across the Aegean Sea takes him and his companions out of their comfort zone into unfamiliar territory. The seeds sown by Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke, and nurtured by the families of Lydia and the town jailor, bring in a rich harvest. 'Let the people praise you, O God; let all the people praise you'. All the people - not just those who are like us. We are blessed in order to bless others. God refuses to become the private possession of a small sect of Judaism - he escapes from their box and the good news spreads like dandelion seeds on the breeze, so that 'his ways may be known upon earth, his saving power among all nations'.

The story from Acts and the Psalm draws us forward into the universality of God's love, into service to all people, into sowing seed for God's harvest. What wonderful readings for Rogation Sunday. 'The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has

blessed us. May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him'. Amen