

You may be familiar with the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, well this morning's sermon could be entitled *Two Women and a Prison Guard*. If you remember last week we left Paul arriving at Neapolis his second missionary journey having taken an unexpected direction from Turkey across the Aegean Sea to Greece bringing Christianity to Europe for the first time. So this week if you have walked your 16km or 10miles, really or virtually, we arrive in Philippi a prosperous Roman city inland from Neapolis. Philippi, originally founded by the Ancient Greeks, was now according to *Acts 16.12 a leading city in the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony*. The city was conquered by the Romans just over 100 years before Paul's arrival following a major battle which featured some familiar names from history, Cassius, Brutus, versus Octavian and Antony. The latter two won the battle and settled the city and surrounding area predominantly with retired officers from the praetorian guard. They renamed the city *Colonia Augusta Julia Philippiensis, or Philippi* for short. Even today as you walk around the ruins it is still easy to see that this was a once great city with all the mod cons the retired military officers and their families would have expected.

Paul's usual approach in a new city was to seek out the Jewish population, in the first instance. Philippi did not have synagogue so on the Sabbath the Jewish community met outside the city wall near the river. It is here that we encounter the first of our two women, Lydia, whose story we heard in last week's gospel. Lydia, a Phoenician from Thyatira, in modern Turkey, was dealer in purple cloth. She sold, and very likely produced the unique purple dyed cloth, that was sought after by all the best people. The dye was produced from shellfish from the coast of Thyatira a laborious and expensive process. She was a successful business woman in a prosperous city, who clearly owned a spacious home, and had servants to care for her.

Lydia was not Jewish but rather she was a Gentile *worshiper of God* and thus part of the local Jewish community. After hearing Paul preach at the riverside gathering Lydia had the honour of being Paul's first European convert. His first baptism on European soil and she brought her whole household to faith in Christ with her. Lydia immediately offers Paul and his friends the hospitality of her home. giving Paul not just a comfortable base in Philippi but also an introduction into the gentile world. She clearly remains close to Paul during his stay welcoming him and Silas back into her home after their discharge from prison, bruised and battered though they were. She was clearly willing to risk the wrath of both the Roman authorities and other local business folk to help someone who was so important in her life.

Which bring us to this morning's gospel and the young woman whose name is not given but who also plays an important role during Paul's stay in Philippi. You can still walk through the ruins of the Agora, the main market place, of the city which is where Paul encounters the young slave woman with prophetic powers whose talents made her owners a lot of money. The religion of ancient Greece placed a lot of emphasis on *oracles*, usually women who based themselves in holy places. The most famous of these is the *Oracle of Delphi*. These *oracles* were for many people a popular source for help with making crucial decisions or getting predictions of the future. The Romans were more than happy to accommodate *oracles* when they settled in Greece and probably made good use of their services. They would not have seen this girl as demon possessed as it is sometimes described, but as someone with a holy gift. But in Mark's gospel if you remember it is often the demons who are the first to recognise and name Jesus as the Son of God. This story is similar because it is the prophetic voice in the young slave girl who proclaims *These men are working for the Most High God. They're laying out the road of salvation for you!* She does this not just once but day after day, every time their paths cross in the Agora. Typical of Paul he loses patience not with the girl herself but with the source of the disturbance and *commands the spirit that possessed her, "Out! In the name of Jesus Christ, get out of her!" And it was gone, just like that.*

This naturally makes Paul and Silas very unpopular with the slave's owners who have lost a lucrative and perfectly acceptable source of income. So they denounce Paul and his companions to the authorities, as being Jewish and for preaching a new disruptive religion. The Roman authorities did not like anything which disrupted the smooth running of the city so they threw Paul and Silas into prison, which brings us to our third resident of Philippi, the prison guard. This conversion is rather more dramatic including as it does an earthquake, a non-prison prison break and the subsequent conversion of the guard and his whole household.

So we have met three of the original members of this early Christian Church at Philippi; Lydia a prosperous gentile business woman, an un-named, probably Greek, slave girl and a Roman prison guard. We don't actually know what happened to the slave girl but I would like to think that Lydia or other members of the newly emerging Christian community took her in and looked after her. It is these people and those they gathered around them grew into the community very dear to Paul's heart. In his letter to them written from a Roman prison more than 10 years later he speaks to them of joy in remembering his time with them. It is possible that Paul visited Philippi twice more on subsequent journeys and he certainly kept in close touch with this community.

He begins his letter: *Paul and Timothy, both of us committed servants of Christ Jesus, write this letter to all the followers of Jesus in Philippi, pastors and ministers included. We greet you with the grace and peace that comes from God our Father and our Master, Jesus Christ. . . . Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God. . . . I find myself praying for you with a glad heart. I am so pleased that you have continued on in this with us, believing and proclaiming God's Message, from the day you heard it right up to the present.*

It is a testimony to the strength of Christian faith established by Paul in Philippi that there are no fewer than four Christian basilicas, dating from the 3-4th centuries AD, among the ruins at Philippi. The most impressive is the octagonal church with beautiful mosaics some of which depict Paul's first visit to the city.

But like Paul who never lingered long in any one place on his travels, usually because he was asked to depart, we leave Philippi and *travel [on foot] by way of Amphipolis and Apollonia and on to Thessalonica*. There are some 147km or 91 miles to travel so I will leave you with some of Paul's own words to the Philippians for reflection as you travel.

***Philippians 4: 7-9:*** *The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*