

Acts 16:6-15 CCH 13th Sept 2020

T: The gospel to Europe! **A:** To encourage us with God's pursuit of gospel progress

P: Encourage us (to get on board) with God's unstoppable gospel Mission

M: by showing us God advancing his gospel across borders.

v14

There's no doubt we are in **new territory**.

- First service in person for nearly 6 months!
 - And first hybrid service I've ever done! Thanks all!
 - But in last few months we have already been living in new territory globally. **COVID**
 - As we go forward from here what will the world look like?
 - Will there be another lockdown?
 - Will there be a vaccine, and will we return to normality or will life be changed permanently?
 - But more than that we are in new territory for the gospel.
 - Will the good news of Jesus be welcome in the next season, or will people just be focused on themselves.
 - Will people be more hungry for the message of Christianity, or write us off as crackpots who need a crutch in times of difficulty?
 - We are in new territory!
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Book of Acts starts in **Jerusalem** and ends in **Rome**.

1:8. **Ripples** across pond.

Earlier in summer been looking at Acts 1-7. Extraordinary events in Jerusalem after the ascension of Jesus- the coming of the Holy Spirit, the beginning of the. The gospel has advanced out of Jerusalem and into the surrounding area- 1:8: **Jerusalem (x marks the spot)** **Judea (that's as far as our series got- Jewish territory)**, Samaria (next part of , but it's heading to ends of the earth.

A lot has happened which we haven't covered since the stoning of Stephen where we left things. The gospel going to Samaria.

The Ethiopian Eunuch, Paul's conversion. Peter's vision and the conversion of the first Gentile: Cornelius.

The spreading of the gospel in parts of Turkey.

This is all great progress for early Christianity, but how is the gospel going to fare in **new Territory**? In sophisticated cities of what we call Europe?

Is there any place for the good news in 1st Century cities like roman Philippi, multicultural Athens, worldly Corinth? Or will Christianity which has made it over previous hurdles fall in these places?

These modern cities with all the complexities of modern day life. It's all well to see the gospel go out in the normality of Turkey but what about further over?

And so there's a parallel today with the new territory of the Covid world?

Can we expect Christianity make any progress in the new covid world?

The answer from Acts 16 is a resounding yes.

Because God is committed to the spread of his good news.

Let's look at our passage under two headings

1) God is at work to open new doors for the gospel (v6-12)

As I read through the first half of the reading from v6 again, let's look again at our map.

We pick up the story at the beginning of our passage 16:6. And a lot has happened

16:6a- Phrygia and Galatia (Ly and Der)
His companions now include Silas and Timothy.

16:6b- having been kept from Asia. Hold that thought!

Their journey therefore takes them North rather than South-West, and v7. 8.

Now let's just pause there. Isn't that interesting? The Holy Spirit is mentioned twice (though with different titles- v6 the Holy Spirit and v7 the Spirit of Jesus). And both times here he is blocking the way for the gospel.

How strange.

We don't know in what form this block came. Perhaps a prophecy from one of the team, Jesus clearly directing them away from Asia or Bithynia. Perhaps it was just through circumstances- a road block, a vomiting bug, or visa issues!

But very clearly the Holy Spirit seems to be blocking the way for the gospel to advance into these areas.

Now why would he do that? It can't be that the Holy Spirit doesn't want the advance of the gospel to these areas. We've seen in Acts that the gospel is a message for the whole world.

Some have pointed out that Peter's first letter is addressed to exiles in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, **Asia** and **Bithynia**. So perhaps the Holy Spirit was saving these parts up for Peter's mission. And Paul does make it to Ephesus (SW Asia) later.

And wonderfully, we saw this morning that Epaphras later took the gospel to Colossae, which is where the first road block was.

What is clear from the next verses is that God the Holy Spirit wanted to push Paul and his companions onto northern Greece (Macedonia). So we move from two closed doors (what we might call negative guidance) to an open door (what we might call positive guidance). Two doors close, one door opens.

v9,10 . A man of Macedonia- some guess that the man in the dream was wearing Macedonian national dress, or he had an accent. But it's not rocket science- the clue is in what he says... "Come over to **Macedonia** and help us".

And what a lovely description of gospel preaching. Come and **Help** us. Is there anything more helpful you can do for a friend or family member than share the good news of Jesus? You meet a new neighbour in your area, of course you try and help them practically- and that's all part of building a relationship.

But the greatest help you can ever give them is in time to pray for an opportunity to share with them the verbal message of the gospel to introduce them to Jesus who brings forgiveness, transformation, and hope.

So v10.

[Just notice something there- we could easily have missed it having not been reading through the book from chapter 1. It's here that THEY turns to WE. v10. WE got ready at once. US! Here is Dr Luke who wrote his first book- what we call the gospel of Luke to his friend Theophilus, now reporting his part in the story. This is where HE joins the crew.]

And in verses 11 and 12 we read about the journey v11- pretty quick 2days whereas coming back the other way in chapter 20 it took them 5 days (I love Luke the doctor's record of facts and figures, it all gives us great confidence that this is actual history and not some religious fairy tale). So v12 we end up at our destination: Philippi. On what we now call European soil.

Now this may all seem like a bit of an ancient Geography lesson so far- a little bit removed from our day to day life.

But not at all- we're seeing God at work, manoeuvring his workers into position for the preaching of the gospel through closed doors and a clear open door. It's fascinating.

God is at work to open new doors for the gospel.

▲ He did it in the first century and he's done it ever since. In 1949 missionaries were thrown out of China. What a disappointment. What a seeming step backwards for the gospel. Why would the Holy Spirit allow that?

But no, one door closed, another opened. A mighty army of Chinese evangelists arose, and the indigenous church grew faster than it did when the missionaries were there. Some of you today are testimony to that wave of God's Spirit.

God is at work to open new doors for the gospel.

▲ When we were looking at areas to plant a church from Cambridge, Bishop Stephen said to me quite loudly at the Diocesan Synod "Huntingdon". I am the man of Macedonia calling you to Huntingdon.

And sure enough God opened a door for a new church in Huntingdon.

And as we move into this new era, who would have known that God would provide a place for us at Inflatabounce!

It's an encouragement for us as a church, it's an encouragement for us as individuals.

We pray for a chance to share the good news with Rick a work colleague or Janet a friend at the school gate. But it doesn't quite work out... Rick moves away, or Janet gets busy. But a new friendship strikes up with Abdul or Sheila.

God is at work to open new doors to the gospel.

Isn't that an encouragement? God is pursuing his mission. It's HIS work. We don't always get to see what he's doing and sometimes from our perspective we wouldn't have chosen this route.

We sometimes hit road blocks- St Peters closes its doors. Inflatapounce opens its.

But like a mighty river on the flood plains, stop the river in one place, and it will change course and opportunities will arise elsewhere. **God is at work to open new doors for the gospel.**

Livingstone tried to go to China, but God directed him to Africa. Adoniram Judson took the gospel first to India, but God pushed him onto Burma. William Carey was ready to go to the South Seas of Polynesia, but God wanted him in India.

God is at work to open new doors for the gospel.

On a personal note, Emma and I were ready to spend the rest of our lives in Belgium, but he brought us to Huntingdon!

So don't be discouraged when you see perplexing closed doors- a road block, visa troubles, a Covid virus that seems to put a spanner in the works. God is at work, and he's probably about to do something amazing.

He'll get his gospel where he wants it to be. Let's trust him.

And let's keep in step with him, taking the opportunities.

So let's move on and see what God was calling Paul over to Macedonia for. It's wonderfully encouraging.

God isn't at work solely **to open new doors for the gospel.**

2) God is at work to open new hearts to the gospel (v13-15)

v13. We find ourselves with Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke by the Gangites river just outside Philippi. Philippi since the 4th century BC was a Roman outpost in Greek surroundings, a little like you are supposedly treading on US soil when you are in a US embassy.

So here we are in the backyard of the Roman Empire- a retirement city for Roman soldiers, where Roman Law is practiced and where Rome can flex its muscles and show the world who is boss. Hardly a place where we might expect the gospel to flourish.

v13. Remember Paul often starts with the Jews and then moves to the Gentiles. It took 10 Jewish males to start a synagogue, but here there is mention of only women. So the next best thing in Jewish practice was for whoever was available to meet for prayer, often near a river where ceremonial washings could happen. Here we are in some insignificant place- a bunch of women off the beaten track- but exactly the kind of setting where God loves to work.

And it's in v14 we are introduced to Lydia. v14a.

Now this is fascinating. For so many reasons.

First a Man of Macedonia?! They meet a woman!

Next a rich woman. Purple cloth was expensive- made with purple dye from a certain root, so Lydia could have been quite rich.

So a rich woman away from her roots. Living in Philippi, even though she grew up over the pond. Often that's God's way.

When someone is away from home, they are sometimes more open to thinking about matters of faith.

▲ Penny and Sandy were two Chinese women who we met in our neighbourhood in Cambridge. We couldn't keep them away from church. They just wanted to know more and more. Living away from home, they were particularly open to hear about Christianity.

Perhaps in this season of dislocation and new normals, God will bring people to think about him.

Well Lydia is described as a worshipper of God. In other words though she wasn't ethnically Jewish, she had become an follower of the Jewish religion- fearing God and following Jewish practices.

But it's the next part that's really significant. v14b. *"The Lord opened her heart to respond to Pauls' message"*.

Paul did the **easy** part- spoke about Jesus. And God did the **hard** part- changed the whole direction of her life to follow Jesus. **God is at work to open new hearts to the gospel.**

It's the miracle of new birth. However softened we may already be to the Christian news, (as Lydia was by her Jewish interest), she still needed God to work a miracle.

And as Paul talked about the carpenter from Nazareth, she felt her heart strangely warmed.

He spoke of Jesus' amazing teaching, his great compassion, his death on the cross, his resurrection from the dead, and she could see from everything she had gleaned from the Jewish scriptures that he could be none other than the Messiah-

God's answer for a broken world. The Son of God come to rescue sinners.... come to rescue her. A message of hope beyond the grave, a message of love for undeserving sinners.

And we don't know exactly how it all felt- maybe there were tears of joy, maybe she was a matter of fact sort, for whom it all sort of clicked into place.

But God opened her heart.

And as is normal in NT Christianity, internal change was marked by the external sign of baptism. v15a. And her outward life proved that internal change. Once her **heart** was opened, her **front door** was opened, and she insisted that the missionaries find hospitality in her home. v15b.

It's a beautiful but simple story of God at work- opening blind eyes to see Jesus. The first convert in fact in what we call Europe.

Are people too sophisticated, too multicultural, too rich in Philippi to accept the good news?

Does the message have to be transposed, translated, transformed so that it's more palatable to sophisticated European culture in Rome's back yard?

AS we go into this new Covid era is it too difficult for the gospel?

No God is at work. He opens doors, he opens hearts.

We need to remember this story, because God is at work today- opening doors, opening hearts. He does so by the preaching of this same good news.

It's as the gospel message is explained that the Lord loves to open hearts. It's why we must **share the good news**.

In public from this pulpit, in private, gossiping the gospel at the swings, on the tennis court, in the bar.

Can I encourage you to be bold with those around you? Start with a question... "What's your opinion of Jesus? Have you ever looked into the Bible? Is that something you'd be interested in?"

We don't **need to change the message or water it down in the Covid era**. Rich and successful Lydia needed to hear of the risen and crucified King. God uses the same message today.

It's also why we must pray. Only God can open hearts- we can share the good news until we are blue in the face, but only God can make the change.

If you're not a convinced Christian today and you are watching today, you need to ask God to open your heart.

But if you are a follower, you need to ask God to open doors for the gospel and then open hearts to the gospel.

God is at work- the question is, will we be?

Can I finish with a story.

▲ There was once a school teacher called Richard. He worked at an all-boys junior school in London in the 1980s. He worked and prayed hard to try and reach the kids with the gospel, and one day God opened the door.

A new head was appointed who was a Christian, and Richard managed to get permission to show a cine film of the Christian holidays he was involved with. He put out about 100 chairs, and asked all the parents he could if they'd like to come along after school.

The afternoon of the slideshow happened, and only 3 kids turned up, and actually one of them had to- he was Richard's own son!

If I was Richard, I would have thought, "Lord, where's this open door I've been praying for? Hardly a great revival". 2 kids sitting on the back row of 100 chairs with my son.

But both of those 2 kids went on that camp that summer, where gospel was simply explained from the Bible.

Wonderfully the Lord opened both their hearts of two of them to the good news of Jesus, and one of them is standing in front of you today.

Let's pray.