**14th June 2015**

**Acts 16.1-15**

My car went in for major surgery this week. We bought our Ford S max new eight years ago and 111,000 miles later it was making some disturbing noises. It had been in for a service and MOT and the mechanic suggested it could be our fly wheel and clutch that needed replacing. Anyway it went into the garage this week for some major repair work. It was kept in overnight and bizarrely I had a dream that evening about buying a new Ford Mondeo – a different car altogether. In my dream I could virtually smell that distinctive aroma of a new car and I took it for a test drive. Perhaps I was subconsciously auditioning for the vacant position as host of Top Gear. The new Jeremy Clarkson! Perhaps I was being told – you should have got rid of the Smax it’s only going to cost you more money. (I haven’t had the bill yet). What is equally disturbing is that I’m dreaming about something as mundane as cars. How sad and middle aged am I becoming?

In a few weeks’ time I shall be taking a three month Sabbatical from being a church minster. The United Reformed Church allows its minsters to have a sabbatical every ten years of ministry. It is like going for a Service and MOT and even a major overhaul and mechanical work! We get chance to reflect on how we function and operate as a minister. We get to dream it all up again and find a vision to inspire us and an opportunity to get closer to God and run more smoothly on the petrol of His Spirit.

It is twenty years now since I was ordained as a minister and I am so thankful for what God has done during those years. Yet I have a hunger for more. It is a frustration and sadness and a pressing need I feel when I see people still trapped in depression, or despair, still sick or held in the grip of addictions.

The prayer team have been reading and discussing Bill Johnson’s and Randy Clark’s book The Essential guide to Healing (pub. Chosen 2011) and a chapter we read this week was creating a faith culture. This is what he writes:

*The best way to create an atmosphere of faith is to start with an overwhelming awareness of need and realize the impossibility of our assignment from God.*

*Often we get caught up with what is possible through human effort. We build our buildings and pay for great programmes. While those things are good, it is tragic when they become the high point of our celebration of Christian achievement. When that is the case, it makes us no different than one of the many good service clubs in our communities.*

*We are responsible for more. We are responsible to live in such a way that the Gospel that Jesus lived, preached and demonstrated will once again take centre stage in world affairs. The impossible invites the faith full to come and conquer. …. Being overwhelmed with the task at hand should take us quickly to the end of our resources - which is the beginning of His resources.*

*Faith is the primary tool used to access and release all that he has made available. This is no small matter. Jesus said the Father had given Him everything as an inheritance. It is the Holy Spirit who transfers everything into our account to complete our commission. Since God is not a God of waste, why would He give us all things? Because the size of our assignment is that big. We will need to learn how to utilize all things that God has given us to succeed at societal transformation.*

Dreaming about a Ford Mondeo gave me a real jolt: that my dreams ae getting too mundane - too small. I pray that our vision as a church is not too small : that it does not dishonour or limit the God we believe in. We are called to do the impossible. Our Vision statement calls us to be transformed by the gospel and to be used by God to transform, make a difference, to our world for the better, in the name of Christ. It is an impossible task. But only the impossible invites faith.

Bill Johnson finishes that chapter by saying that we must cultivate two attitudes to pursue the miracle lifestyle that Jesus assigned us to – to minster in the power of his Spirit.

The first is thankfulness which is a true expression of humility because it identifies God as the true source for all that is good.

The second attitude is hunger. . This is what he writes, that spoke to me in the aftermath of being presented with my MA (with a distinction I may add!) last weekend.

*I am most dangerous to myself and to the movement I represent when I take on the attitude of an expert. Sadly, by embracing that attitude I have chosen where to level of in my growth. What I know can keep me from what I need to know if I don’t remain a novice (childlike). A childlike approach this miracle lifestyle will keep us honest, humble and continually growing. ‘*

Pease pray for me whilst I am away on sabbatical. I am sure I will return differently hopefully with even more hunger to see God at work in our midst.

Today's readings speak of ways in which God was at work spreading the gospel in the early church. How God used dreams to inspire and guide the apostle Paul and how God opened people hearts to receive the good news about Jesus and how the barriers that keep people apart from God are overcome. Acts tells of geographical boundaries passed as Paul takes the gospel to Macedonia, while Lydia's conversion breaks barriers of gender and class.

Last time I preached we looked at how the church in Antioch were courageous enough to give up two of their key leaders and allowed them to go on a missionary journey through Cyprus and into present day Turkey to spread the message about the risen Lord and how Paul and Barnabas faced conflict in doing that. Since that journey there was controversy about preaching to the Gentiles and whether new Gentile converts to the Christian faith should be required to keep the Jewish customs of circumcision and diet. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 makes a defining decision on this and waivers the need for Gentiles to be circumcised so they had no burden put on them – but some conduct is appropriate in diet and also sexuality.

Paul has split with Barnabas over Mark – an issue I commentated on in my last sermon and now Paul and Silas go off to the region of Phrygia and Galatia strengthening the faith.

They come across a young man called Timothy who is a believer and Paul wants him to join them on the journey. It is always a great challenge selecting the right people for the right roles and situations. Who can we work with, who has the right gifts and talents, the right possibilities. Who do we believe God is calling – how in prayer ae we hearing God’s guidance. Mark didn’t work out with Paul. Now he tries Timothy. It’s not a perfect science is it?

Interestingly, given the decision just made the Jerusalem Council, Paul has Timothy circumcised. That is quite an induction to a new job.

Timothy is the son of a Greek mother. He should have been circumcised as a baby but obviously for some reason he missed out. Timothy does this because of the Jews in those areas. Paul never abandoned his Jewish heritage. But although he strongly defended Gentiles right not to be circumcised if they became followers of Jesus, here he seems not to want to antagonise other Jews and not to fight over what he may regard as non-essentials.

As I said last time Paul always begins his outreach in the synagogues and to have an uncircumcised Jew with him would have made any witness to Jews more difficult. Paul didn’t want anything to become a barrier for people receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ. He is desperate for that to be done to such an extent that he is not going to court unnecessary controversy and offence. He is sensitive to cultural contexts and attitudes. He would not be taking nude photos on top of mountains in Malaysia.

Wherever we practice our faith we need to have a degree of cultural sensitivity so as not to offend people over the non essentials. Only cause pain and offence over the cross of Christ. Although arguably poor Timothy will endure the real pain in this compromise!

Paul wants to spread the gospel. But he is forbidden by the Holy Spirit from speaking the gospel in Asia. Natural human wisdom would have led to think that they should preach the gospel in all the cities that they passed through but instead the Holy Spirit directs them on a 400 mile journey by foot to Troas on the coast of north western Turkey. The spirit of Jesus stopped them moving forward : we are not told explicitly how this happened: for example was this through a specific word of prophecy, or a growing deep inner conviction?

But then the Spirit directs Paul through a dream. Paul has a vision during the night where a Macedonian stands in front of him saying ‘cross over to Macedonia and help us’. As soon as he had seen this vision he and his companions set about getting a passage to Macedonia, convinced that God had called them to take the good news there. It is a vivid account of God’s guidance. Sometimes in life we believe we should move in one direction but then doors close on us. Sometimes we try hard to open those doors as a test that we really want to go in that direction. But then we need discernment as to whether the closed door is closed because we are not meant to be travelling in that direction and need a new course. I do believe in asking God to close doors or open doors as you move forward.

Acts is about God opening doors to the gospel – geographically and also in people’s lives. Luke is writing to show how the gospel is inclusive in nature and God will not allow human boundaries to restrict its reach. The region of Macedonia and the city of Philippi are both strategically located on east-west routes. The gospel will spread west from here into Greece and hence into Europe.

Leaders should be people of vision who can dream dreams of a new future and how things could be, not just how they are. To go to new places, cross new boundaries. That vision of the Macedonian begging – come over and help us – was not rejected. Do you hear God calling you? Do you get the sense of being asked to go beyond your natural boundaries, beyond your self interest? That’s good news.

When Paul crosses those barriers and gets to Macedonia there is the story of Lydia. Paul and his colleagues arrive in Philippi and on the Sabbath go to the riverside where they have heard people gather for prayer. They go to where people are already seeking the spiritual and are open to the spiritual. One woman, called Lydia, listens to them and discusses with them. She is described as a worshipper of God and the Lord opens her heart to respond to what Paul says and she is baptized – and all her household.

The conversion of Lydia, a resident but not a native of Philippi, encapsulates this divine disregard of human boundaries. Nor is gender a bar to receiving the gospel: the story implies that Lydia becomes the central figure in a new Christian community. She makes her home available to Paul and his colleagues (v. 15) and this is later the place where Paul and Silas go on their release from prison (16.40). Lydia seems to be a prosperous woman, for purple dye contained expensive ingredients. Garments made from the cloth she traded were therefore a status symbol. She was your Karen Millen or Vivienne Westwood of her day.

Elsewhere Luke is not afraid to be critical of riches (think of his parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16.19-31) but, in her offer of hospitality, Lydia crucially places her resources in the Lord's service. Social status is another barrier overcome.

Finally, Lydia is already a worshipper of God before her conversion to Christ. Although a Gentile and not fully part of the Jewish community, she has attended the place of prayer. She stands at a frontier in her relationship with God. Through Paul's preaching the Lord opens her heart and enables her to cross it (v. 14). She becomes the first European Christian and members of her household are baptised too (v. 15). From small beginnings the church took root.

Evangelism can be difficult and costly, as Paul and Silas find later when they are imprisoned in Philippi (16.16-40), but when God has been at work ahead of his human agents it can also be surprisingly easy.

We need to co-operate with the Spirit.

After leaving university I became a community worker for a church in Nottingham. It brought me into contact with a number of wonderful individuals in the community who were doing a lot of good work. One woman, who we will call Doreen, was a real community activist. A mother of five she was well respected by everyone in the community and she was a focal point for much community activity. One day I got into conversation with her about going to church and she said that she didn’t feel good enough to go to church. She said she knew her faults and failings and she saw these people entering church dressed up in their Sunday best and she didn’t feel good enough. ‘People like me don’t fit in there’. she said

Doreen, got terminal cancer. The whole community was in grief. Her husband didn’t know how to handle it all and banned anyone from coming to see her. I paryed about how I should respond. I can’t see her or speak to her but I felt I should send her a card. I took the risk of including on the card some verses from Psalm 91:

*‘whoever goes to the Lord for safety, whoever remains under the protection of the Almighty can say to him ‘you are my defender and protector you are my God in you I trust’*

I had read this psalm during my quiet time of prayer and bible study. As sometimes happen when you are asking God for guidance, it jumped out from the page at me. It was hugely risky to put it in a card. But I took the risk. And I popped it through her door.

Doreen rang me and asked me to round. She said she had tried other faith healers and alternative therapies but to no avail. Could I help her?

Well I said I couldn’t - but God could. I shared the gospel with her and said that there are no guarantees in life but whatever happens we can be safe with God and live without fear in the knowledge that nothing can separate from the love of God.

‘Can I know that’, she said?

I said ‘I believe you can. Would you like me to pray for you, would you like me to pray for Jesus to make himself real to you in your life and for you to know the reassurance of his love?’. She said yes. We prayed and she came over all shaky and started to glow and felt a deep peace. She said she felt as though someone had touched her.

I came back the following day with some bible notes on the 23rd Psalm. I wanted to pray for her healing but her husband was all bemused by this and I was asked to leave. The next day she was admitted into hospital where she died within two days. Her husband and family didn’t want anything to do with me after that.

I do believe she died in peace trusting in Christ.

Next week we will look at the opposition Paul and Silas experienced to the gospel and sometimes the dark powers we face in the struggle for God’s kingdom.

The gospel transcends all human boundaries in order to create a new community in Christ. How we must pray for the Lord to open more hearts. Hearts that are cold, or embittered; hearts that are sad and despondent; hearts that are inward and self focussed. Lord open hearts and lead us by your Holy Spirit guide and empower us as your people in Christ.

**Prayers**
 Jesus says:
'Peace I leave with you,
my peace I give to you.'

Father God, give us open hands to receive the peace we need today;
give us open eyes to look for the signs of his presence in the world;
give us new courage to be faithful in prayer for those who are a long way from home.
**Amen.**

Lord Jesus,
we thank you that you died for us;
we thank you that you were raised from the dead and that you are with us always.
Hold onto us when we are feeling lost and alone.
Speak to us when we need to know where to go.
Touch our lives with your presence,
help us to look for you and find you every day of our lives,
until we see you face to face
and we are welcomed home to be with you for ever.
**Amen.**

**Questions:**

What do you think are the best ways to create a faith culture?

Share any experiences of God’s guidance: open doors/closed doors?

Where would you draw the line in being culturally sensitive but not compromising your faith?

What are you thankful for? What are you hungry for?