

## **Julie's Sermon on Lydia for 30<sup>th</sup> August – Acts 16: 13-15**

So today is the last in our sermon series on men and women in the bible and I know from the many comments that I have had over the last 12 weeks that you have enjoyed learning more about the folk we have talked about. So today we are going to talk about Lydia – and I chose her because she is an extraordinary woman who helped others come to know Jesus by setting up the first house church. So let's find out a bit more about Lydia?

She was a woman living in Philippi the capital of Macedonia which is modern day Greece. The city was a stronghold of the Roman Empire and a military base which meant that there were lots of people living there who had come from many different places and backgrounds. Indeed Lydia herself had moved there from Thyatira some 400 miles away. It was because of her background that she was able to deal in the purple cloth that was used by the Roman nobility because Thyatira was a place that produced the expensive purple dye needed. This is the first thing that strikes me as extraordinary about Lydia because she is obviously a businesswoman in her own right. It says quite clearly that she was a dealer in purple cloth not her husband or father or brother but Lydia herself. As we know this was a time when women were not normally given any sort of status and so it is extraordinary. We are also told that she had a household which means she had servants so she must have been quite a strong character!

The second thing that strikes me about Lydia is that she worshipped God. She would have been brought up as a Gentile – a non-Jew – worshipping other gods but she must have heard the scriptures and learned about and accepted God to be the one true God because we find her sitting by the river worshipping with the other Jewish women when Paul and Silas join them! And this is the point at which Lydia's life changes forever. When she hears Paul teaching about Jesus we are told that God opened her heart to hear what he was saying. So now Lydia not only believes in God but she is determined to follow Jesus.

The most important thing that strikes me about this story is the trust and commitment that Lydia showed once she had heard Paul and accepted Jesus into her life.

This was an instant transformation – she didn't say well I think I believe you but I want some time to think it over before I commit myself – she didn't say come back next week and we'll talk again – no she and her household were baptised immediately. She does not give any thought to the possible consequences she just knows that she has to follow Jesus. Those who were with her may have thought she was mad or that she would soon realise her mistake and reject her new found religion. But they were to be proved wrong because Lydia gave herself fully to serving Jesus. We hear in this short passage this morning how she opened up her home to Paul and those who were with him and if we read on in the chapter we are told that she helped Paul and Silas on their release from jail when they were accused of treason. But there was a cost to accepting what Paul had to say and following Jesus; as a market-trader, getting involved with this man; proclaiming a new religion spelt trouble with a capital 'T'; as a supplier of cloth to the nobility, it meant alienating her most valued customers, as someone who had embraced Judaism, it meant estranging herself from those with whom she'd worshipped; as a citizen of Philippi, she risked making herself a social leper, no one would want to socialize with her, no one would

want to be involved with this Christian woman. Yet she carried on regardless. Why? Well it wasn't because of Paul, but because of Jesus Christ, the one he proclaimed and in whose name he acted. Whatever she heard that day from Paul convinced her that Jesus Christ was worth losing everything she had worked for. That shows amazing trust and commitment.

And she went one step further too and she opened her home to those who had come to faith and became the first church in Europe. She was a woman proud to be associated with the name of Christ; like Paul himself, she was not ashamed of the gospel or concerned at the prospect of rejection and hostility. Here was a woman who was prepared to put her faith before all else, even if it meant risking everything.

Her lesson for us today is straightforward enough. Do we trust in Jesus as she did? Are we as committed to knowing more about Jesus as she was? Would we be prepared to give up everything we have worked for to follow him?

Not easy questions to answer are they. We can say "yes of course we would" in the comfort of your homes or churches but I wonder what would happen if it became a reality!

Thankfully we don't have to make those choices and we can speak out about our faith and show others that we trust in God in good times and in bad. But trusting is not always easy and it involves risk!

I am sure you have heard the one about the man who fell over the edge of a cliff. He managed to grab onto a small thorn bush which stopped him from falling to his death. He could not climb back up as it was too steep and he could not let go because it was a sheer drop. He looked up and called out "is there anybody there?" To his delight a voice said "Yes, I the Lord your God am here". "What shall I do?" asked the man. After a long pause the voice said "Trust me and let go". The man looked down at the rocks below and then he looked up again and called out "Is there anyone else up there?"

As I said trust involves risk and sometimes we are not ready to take the risk! But we have to if we want to become disciples of Jesus and follow him.

Because when we do then we will reap the rewards. The reward of knowing that we are never alone and that Jesus will be there for us until the end of the age!

During this time of Covid and lockdown life has not been easy for everyone but having Jesus right there with us has been an enormous help and comfort. Lots of people have been wondering and enquiring about what it means to have faith because they need to know that God has us right there in the palm of his hand and that he will help us! As Christians we know that is true and so we need to be there for those people and show them the love of God in our actions and our words; just like Lydia. Her commitment to Jesus meant she started the first church in Europe and encouraged others to come to know Jesus. She didn't care that others laughed or ridiculed her, she didn't care that she lost friends and customers because she knew that following Jesus was the most important thing in her life. She trusted that if she followed him then whilst life might be different it would be fulfilling and worthwhile!

Lydia was an extraordinary woman who took a risk to follow her heart. You are extraordinary too; so go on take a risk and tell someone about Jesus today because you might just start something new in them and in yourself!! Amen