

## **16/01/22 Acts 16:1-15**

Over the coming months you may pick up discussion on the future direction of the church. It's something that has arisen partly out of the ongoing pandemic, and the deep effects it has had over the last couple of years on church life; partly out of the reimagining needed due to recent departures from our church family; and partly because we need to anyway.

Jo and I will have been with you all for ten years this coming September and in that time the overall mission statement for the church hasn't changed; plus, it's wise to think through church priorities from time to time.

We've had a preliminary chat about this at Standing Committee and we have introduced the idea to PCC, but we begin our work in earnest next week when we get together once more as a Standing Committee. Please pray for us as we take this work forward. I look forward to having a wider conversation following the next PCC.

But what I'm really talking about here is producing a strategy – a strategy for us as a church. Now there is a sense in which our strategy has already been set out for us by God in his Word.

For example, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Our overall Biblical strategy is set – make disciples of all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Trinity; and teaching them to obey God's word. There, not that difficult really, is it? And much time and effort could be saved in the Church of England, I think, if we continually reminded ourselves of those words and sought to be obedient to them.

I would suggest, therefore, that much of what we will be discussing over the following weeks will, in fact, be a local strategy for the Gospel.

In other words, how best might we share the Gospel in our local community whilst ensuring that we grow in love and obedience to the Lord? It won't be easy, but the good news is that we have the overall strategy already in place.

And as we come to our reading from Acts, we find ourselves in a pivotal point. In chapter 15 we have arguments over the Gentile believer's use of the Law; through to the debate and conclusion of the Jerusalem Council. And this conclusion is crucial to what happens for the rest of

Acts, for without that conclusion, the growth amongst the Gentiles would have been much more difficult. However, as it happened it allowed the missionary journeys undertaken from Antioch to continue.

And that's immediately what happens as Paul sets off with Silas on his second missionary journey. And he clearly had a plan in mind. In verse 36 of chapter 15 we read "Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.""

Paul's plan was clearly to encourage and further teach the churches already established with Barnabas. God had alternative ideas and what we have in the passage in chapter 16 is the unfolding of a divine strategy which takes Paul and Silas into Europe and sits nicely under the overall strategy to preach the Gospel to all nations.

God's strategy here splits into three – verses 1-5 I've entitled "Divine wisdom." Verses 6-10 I've entitled "Divine steering." And verses 11-15 I've entitled "Divine conversion."

Let's begin with the first part of the strategy "Divine wisdom."

"Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they travelled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers."

In verse 1, at Derbe, we're introduced to a new character – Timothy. He has a Greek father and a Jewish mother, and, for some reason, he hadn't been baptised. He was clearly well-liked, but there was a potential circumcised.

Now if the decision of the Jerusalem Council had been followed then that wouldn't have mattered – it wasn't a centrally important Gospel issue. But Paul circumcises Timothy. Why? Why did he go against the Council decision that he had fought so hard to put in place?

Well, we are told that Paul did it "because of the Jews who lived in that area." And that points to an overall strategy. Paul's habit on reaching a new area, town or city was to go to the synagogue and preach first of all to the Jews and, if that wasn't successful, then to the Gentiles.

Quite simply Paul was taking the pragmatic step of circumcising Timothy to enable him to join in his work. If he did not, then he could not have entered the synagogue – he'd have been treated like an outsider.

It's a strategy that Paul used elsewhere. As he writes to the Corinthian church "Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."

Paul will do almost anything within reason to enable him to preach to any group of people at any time. As he says, "I do all this for the sake of the gospel."

I don't think suppose it would it come as a great surprise for you to hear that I'm not the greatest fan of wearing robes. My personal view is that it forms a cultural barrier which is unhelpful.

However, in a different church where the habit is to robe up, I would be more than happy to join in the local tradition if it enables me to stand in the pulpit and preach the Gospel. In those circumstances I can tolerate all sorts of strange things.

Paul is being wise. He knows that by acting in this way he will be able to speak to the local Jews as he goes on his travels. However, we read that this forms just part of a wider strategy and that was to deliver the Council decision for the people to obey.

And the result? Well, think its no accident that we read "So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers." The very reason for travelling round these churches was achieved – they were strengthened, and in the process, they grew daily.

As we move forward, we need to be actively seeking God's wisdom. There is little point in undertaking this on our own as we won't be seeking to do what he wants; rather it'll be what we would like to think he wants, which is the certainly not the same.

Please pray for this whole process. Pray for God's direction, God's timing, God's will to be done. Pray that we would provide us with the necessary resources and that the end result might be something that is glorifying to him and him alone. This is not a moment for grand schemes and big events; this is a moment beginning again and growing.

So, we've looked at "Divine wisdom." The second part of God's strategy, found in verses 6-10 I've entitled "Divine steering."

"Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."

The passage takes a slightly unusual turn as we have continued overt directions from the Spirit. I have no doubt that when Paul and Silas originally left Antioch, they'd discussed their direction of travel with the church leaders and agreed a direction of travel.

We may even have a hint of that in the directions of travel where they were prevented from going. Why? Because God himself was directly intervening through the Spirit and setting the agenda himself. He had a plan and wanted Paul and Silas to carry it out.

Paul was prevented by the Holy Spirit to moving from modern-day Western Turkey to moving further into Asia. The Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to go to Bithynia, leading them instead to the coast at Troas. And then we have this vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging Paul to go across into Europe. Paul gets the idea "concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."

God's strategy was clearly to move Paul and friends into new areas, for the Gospel, in mainland Greece.

I have no idea what would have happened if Paul had not obeyed God. Presumably he would have preached the Gospel, but to no great advancement, I don't really know. But I am clear that Paul was open to and obedient to God's strategic leading.

The question is are we truly open to the leading of the Spirit? Are we truly open to begin lead in fresh directions? Now let's be clear, that does not mean being "open" to changing fundamental Biblical teaching. It does not mean bending what we beliefs to whatever happens to be going on culturally at any given time.

But it might involve listening to our surrounding culture and interacting with it. It might mean dropping things that we treasure in order to be more effective in sharing the good news. It might be that in a year's time we look very different to the way we look now. Are we truly open to the Spirit's strategic direction?

Finally, having looked at "Divine wisdom" and "Divine steering," we'll finish with "Divine conversion."

Verse 11: "From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. From there we travelled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us."

As Paul and friends get to work in Europe they choose to focus on the Roman colony of Philippi. Philippi as a major regional centre and formed a sort of retirement home for former military leaders.

More importantly, however, for Paul's strategy there was hardly any Jewish population. Nevertheless, he continued with his strategy and went down to the river.

Why is this significant? Well, to have a synagogue there needed to be ten male householders. Clearly there weren't enough of those, so the best alternative is to meet by water. Thus, Paul was able to go outside the city gate to the river and speak to the women who were gathered there.

Whilst there he met a businesswoman called Lydia who, we are told, was a worshiper of God. In other words, she was not a Jewish convert but was a God fearer who was sympathetic to the Jewish faith.

Rather wonderfully we read that “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message” and she baptized along with her household. The effect of the Gospel on her was immediate as she invited them to her home and, we read “she persuaded us.”

We can have as many strategies in place as we like but, ultimately, someone becoming a follower of the Lord Jesus is an act of the Spirit. So, all through the process we are about to embark on we need to be praying that God will open blind eyes; that we will see many people like Lydia both respond to the good news of the Lord Jesus and that, because of that response, that their lives will be radically changed.

We have followed Paul and his companions though Western Turkey across the sea into the new territory of Greece. We have seen his mission strategy change from one of encouraging existing churches to one of establishing new churches.

In this passage we have seen God’s strategy in action. His great wisdom in setting the parameters of the journey. His clear steering ensuring that the journey went in the direction he had in mind. His decisive action in converting Lydia and household.

We can look forward with bated breath to seeing God at work in setting the parameters for our ongoing work here; to seeing God setting us moving in the direction into which he wants us to go; and finally seeing people declare Jesus as King and Rescuer. Amen.