

Viral: A New Hospitality



Acts 16:13-40

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Intro

One of my surprises this week was opening a parcel from my Mum and discovering face masks she has made for us. Part of the astonishment was just how long some of the material has been around; including some from our high school uniforms! That's over 30 years ago. Sadly, it will still be a number of weeks before I can leave our Greater Melbourne lockdown to thank her in person.

Sometimes it seems like lockdown prevents us from personal generosity and hospitality. Hospitality has been a linchpin of ministry at St Michael's. Hospitality in our homes, local places and on the church site has been a consistent feature of ministry here. So what does it mean for our welcome and sharing when we can't get together in person? We're going to look at what Luke writes about hospitality in Acts 16 and see how God shifted the expectation and practice of hospitality in the early church.

Trip to Europe

Geography and location are key in Acts so I'll do a quick run down of the itinerary. We're in Paul's 2nd missionary journey. If you can see the splodgy colours on the map, his 1st journey was mainly in the yellow, purple and dark green bits. In the early verses of the chapter, Paul wants to travel to Asia, the red bit, but is 'forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word' there. Then they tried to go north to Bithynia, the pale green bit, but 'the spirit of Jesus did not allow them'. After this Paul has a vision of 'a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying "Come

over to Macedonia and help us". So they go from Troas to Samothrace to Neapolis and overland to Philippi (orange top left), 'which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. It was supposedly popular with retired soldiers of the Roman army. The important thing to note is they've now crossed into Europe. Let the action begin. (Acts 16 on device or analog)

Precis of the chapter. An evangelist walks into a city and meets a business woman, a fortune teller and correctional facilities officer.

The rest is history.

The man of Macedonia is a woman - Lydia

We pick up the action at vs 13. On the sabbath day (that's the Jewish sabbath) we went outside the city by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer and we sat down and spoke to the women gathered there.

2 things to note –

- Beginning at verse 10 this is the first of the 4 'we' passages in Acts where the author shifts pronoun to the 1st person plural, so he's now giving a personal account of events.
- Plus, they didn't go to a synagogue which indicates there isn't one. Only women are mentioned, Women couldn't form a synagogue. For Paul's first evangelistic action on European soil to be to teach Gentile god-fearing women is consistent with his view that we are all one in Christ.

Lydia, a worshiper of God was there. Lydia isn't Jewish herself but she worships the Jewish God. She's originally from Thyatira, a city in Asia, and is a dealer in purple cloth. That makes sense because Thyatira was known for its production of purple dye and cloth.

Lydia listens to Paul speak the good news of Jesus Christ and is baptized straight away. “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.”

Lydia’s first response after hearing the gospel and being baptized is to offer hospitality to these men who have shared the good news with her and her household.

Lydia’s words about being *judged faithful* echo Jesus’ instruction to the disciples in Matthew when he sends them out on a mission “find out who is worthy, and stay there until you leave.”

This was a radical shift by Jesus in the practice of hospitality in the ancient world, it was accepted that a guest would always be on the lookout for a better offer from a more prestigious host.

Our takeaway is that Lydia’s conversion is true, her acceptance of salvation complete, and she immediately expresses her faith in good works, showing a genuine response to the gospel.

You’ll also note that as the first convert in Europe, it turns out the man of Macedonia was a woman.

It’s interesting too, that there’s no mention in the New Testament of an apostle going to Thyatira where Lydia was from, but within a relatively short period we know there’s a thriving church in Thyatira. Make of that what you will.

Snakes but no ladders – the unnamed slave girl

The next bit of the action is an explanation for how Paul and Silas end up in prison.

As they go back and forth through the marketplace to the place of prayer, they’re followed by a slave girl who we’re told had a spirit of divination.

The original intent of the Greek is “had a Pythian spirit”. Pythian as in python, which was associated with the cult of Apollo and the oracle of Delphi. The statement she makes “these men proclaim to you a way of salvation” is true. Like Jesus before him when demons had announced him as the Son of God, Paul looks past the surface of the person to the supernatural beyond. He sees, not mental illness or even a follower of another religion. In this specific instance he sees the demon that possesses the woman and he commands in the name of Jesus that it come out of her.

Some commentaries and blogs, express concern that Paul acts to silence the woman, treats her as being of no value, doesn't listen to her. “she is not even given the dignity of a name but is treated as a commodity.” Says one.

While I understand the concern I think it reads too much into this text.

The jailer we're about to meet is not given a name either.

But also, Paul does see her. He sees past her slavery, past the role she's been forced into. He even sees past her flesh and blood.

I absolutely agree that as a church we need to do more listening to those who are voiceless, and give care to the vulnerable. Paul himself advocates for that. But the circumstance of this text is that Paul, with his supernatural awareness, sees the demon inside her and commands it to leave her. That act had consequences for her and for him. While we can speculate (like I just did on the gospel getting to Thyatira), we simply don't know what happened to her next.

We do know that in very short order Paul and Silas are severely beaten and brought before the magistrate for disturbing the peace. The charge against them includes that ‘they are Jews’ and are preaching a God incompatible with Roman ideals. Of all the followers, the locals only accuse Paul and Silas who look Jewish and assume that because they're Jewish they can't possibly be Roman citizens. As citizens they'd have legal rights, as non-citizens they have none and they're thrown in jail. Of course, Paul & Silas are actually Roman citizens which comes out later, but at this point the town leaders base their version of hospitality in fear

and threat, assuming a position of superiority over the strangers in their city because they're 'not like us'. The response by the slave owners in their anger at loss of income, is the unjust imprisonment of lawful citizens on the basis of race and religion.

Contrast this with the hospitality shown by Lydia. A response to the gospel that generates hospitality and shows love of God and of others.

What must I do? - The unnamed jailer

I am going to skip forward in the text here because Paul and Silas in jail is a sermon in itself. Suffice to say, we're told they're locked in an inner cell with their feet in stocks. Instead of bemoaning their fate they pray, sing hymns and share the gospel with the other prisoners. Around midnight there's a localized earthquake and not only are prison doors opened, chains fall off and the stocks fall open.

The jailer, certain that his prisoners must have escaped is about to kill himself, well aware that jailers who failed to stop a prisoner escaping received the punishment intended for the prisoner. Paul, aware of that, calls to the jailer that all prisoners are still there. In this, Paul himself practices hospitality. Instead of prioritizing his own self interest (escaping) he puts the welfare of the jailer first and protects the jailer's life over his own. (A lesson for all of us at the moment)

The events of the night have made the jailer acutely aware of 'the most high God'. He responds firstly with an act of repentance. Vs 30. He brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

Don't get hung up on the 'believe on' instead of 'believe in'. The Greek word used is *epi* which is 'believe towards the Lord Jesus'. Either way, the confession is 'Jesus is Lord'.

Just a note on the 'you and your household will be saved' – it's not that the jailers' faith would be sufficient for the other members of his household, but that they too could hear the gospel and accept Jesus as Lord.

Like Lydia the jailer responds to the message of salvation by grace alone and his baptism with an act of hospitality - he cleans their wounds and invites them to share a meal.

There is no hesitation on the part of Paul and Silas, jailed for being Jews, in accepting hospitality from the jailer who has just become a 'brother in Christ'. They share an agape meal together and then return to their cells.

There is more in the story, once again contrasting the lack of hospitality of the town leaders (whose understanding of hospitality is shown as the opposite of God's) with the generous hospitality of those who come to believe in Jesus. The upshot is Paul and Silas are released from jail, go to Lydia's to encourage the brothers and sisters and depart from Philippi.

A new hospitality

In the course of these verses we've seen Luke showing both a contrast and a shift in understanding of hospitality. Old hospitality he says, is based in fear. It seeks to neutralize a threat, assumes superiority, wealth and privilege. It's suspicious of the other and moves to exclude the new and different.

New hospitality on the other hand, comes from a place of grace and blessing. It's not conscious of the status and power of either the host or the guest. It comes from a position of equality in God's eyes. It listens to and welcomes the other, understanding them as made in the image of God. New hospitality sees the stranger and the different from me as a valuable child of God. It seeks to show love for God and love for neighbour by extending hospitality and blessing.

Here in Acts, we see that hospitality becomes the vehicle through which evangelization and incorporation of the Gentiles into the life of the Christian community are first realized.

The custom of hospitality encourages Jewish Christians to see Gentile Christians as covenant partners in the community of Christ.

Both here, and in his gospel, Luke creates a direct link between the custom of hospitality and the integration of Gentiles into the life of the church.

David Williams in his commentary on Acts says - ..if anything marked the divergence of the new faith from the old it was these conversions at Philippi. Not only had the gospel crossed the Aegean [into Europe], but it had bridged the ... gulf of sexual, social and racial distinction.

Our hospitality

As always, there is a question of what it means for us. Especially at the moment when our usual habits of hospitality in the gospel have to go unrealized in lockdown.

Let's consider the heart of God's hospitality. God's hospitality seeks the best for the other person as someone made in the image of God.

Our practice of hospitality welcomes the stranger and listens to the different. It shows love for others. It has an intent to serve especially those who are vulnerable, whose lives are upended, who need help. There's a desire to build deep relationships and strengthen loyal bonds in community.

At the moment that may be a phone call, grocery shopping, a letter, smiling eyes above a mask, a zoom dinner, a job or giving someone a place to sleep. We can talk more over tea or in-home groups; let's think of creative ways we can continue to extend God's blessing to others.

The next weeks and months will continue to be hard. The needs of our community, not just St Michael's but of our neighbours, will exist well beyond lockdown and recovery as the economic cost of COVID will bite hard.

In Luke's writings we hear a call to exercise hospitality to 'the stranger' in creative ways. To proactively seek to extend protection and provision to strangers. Through the ministry of hospitality God can forge deep bonds among his followers and with those who were previously strangers. From a base of grace, love and equality we can model Christ to a watching world as we share the gospel, share our lives and encounter God in the midst of our hospitality.