

Sermon (Address) at Athelstone UC 26th May 2019 at 9:30am (Rev Jenny Swanbury)

Here are my old Frontier Services boots –they have seen a lot of dust and are well worn, but I didn't go through as many boots as I did vehicle tyres at the time.

Today in honour of Lydia – the Apostle Paul's friend I am wearing a purple stole today.

I am thrilled to know Athelstone is Partnering in Mission with Frontier Services here in South Australia this year – and that Rev Sunni Kadaparambil - is coming to share with you very soon.

My boots join your shoes – shoes symbolic of footsteps following the Way of Jesus – footsteps following the Way of Jesus today - in the here and now – at the same time linking into the story of the Apostle Paul meeting Lydia and the women worshipping God at Philippi.

Paul - that giant of an Apostle! In this reading he is on his 2nd Missionary journey. We know a good deal about Paul – his life-changing 'Road to Damascus' experience –from Passionate Persecutor ... to Passionate Advocate for the Way of Jesus. Today's reading is a small insight into Paul – for anyone who is new to Paul. We can read more of him in Book of Acts and the Letters – incredible encounters – crucial to in the beginnings of the early church.

Yes, we know much of Paul – but not as much about Lydia.

Lydia! How do we imagine her to be: strong is the first word coming to me and to others of my friends ... a business woman shrewd in dealings ... good with people ... leadership qualities ... confident ... acting with hospitality ... well organised? ... well travelled ... (after all she comes from Thyatira many kilometres from Philippi. Worshipper of God ... Open to the Spirit ... and to change. Today too, we might say 'trusting her intuition'. A significant woman.

What does she look like? How do you imagine her to be? I imagine sturdy build ... well dressed as would be a dealer in purple dye – the colour of royalty ... wearing at least some purple ... expensive taste.

This is how Sarah Beth Bacca (US theologian and artist – and much younger than me) imagines Lydia ... painted in watercolour and ink.

She is Elegant ... colourful – steady and secure in her gaze.

The artist has written onto the pale mauve strand of hair or veil : "She and her household were baptised."

Paul and friends went out of the city gate and to the river - the place of prayer - there was no synagogue in Philippi at that time. They sat down and spoke with Lydia and the other women gathered there. Lydia took into her heart Paul's message – and she – along with at least some of the women – we believe - began the church there in Philippi – the gathering of saints which became so dear to Paul's heart.

Lydia herself was brave ... a day or two later to receive the controversial Paul and Silas back into her home after they had been beaten by a crowd and imprisoned – then their miraculous escape and release from prison in Philippi. She could have been fearful of the crowd.

Paul and his party spent days or more staying with Lydia and her household. During that time, she would have received teaching from Paul ... to help her be equipped to care for the new community when Paul moved on to bring the gospel to other Macedonian cities. We know the church grew.

The story of Paul's meeting with Lydia has been likened to the story of Jesus taking his unusual journey through Samaria, meeting with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well at Sychar.

Both Paul and Jesus were supernaturally guided to Philippi and Sychar,... respectively: Paul through a vision, Jesus through some kind of compulsion.

The women became believers in Jesus as Messiah and then told others about their experiences. Lydia presumably told members of her household, who followed her lead and were baptised with her. She may also have told business contacts, clients, and neighbours. The Samaritan woman told the people in her village.

These women played a pioneering role in spreading the gospel in their communities.

This happened 2000 years ago. Now – let's fast forward to just 100 years ago.

Around the time of the beginning of what is today Frontier Services.

The start of the story comes from a neighbour in Orroroo ... where I was based as Sturt Patrol Minister – the neighbour is Mrs Joan Ellery ... now well into her 90's. She called in and told me of her mother Rebecca McClintock being a nurse with Australian Inland Mission before WW1 at Beltana & Oodnadatta in outback South Australia.

Mode of transport around that area at the time – camel! Joan gave me this photo taken in 1912 of her mother in long dress and wide hat on a camel & the camel driver behind her.

Before her was Sr Main in 1907, then Sr Bett – both were nurses in Oodnadatta.

These two nurses were there before John Flynn's arrival in Outback mission. As well as nurses ... at times going some distances by camel to tend to sick or injured people ... they were also preachers and Sunday School teachers in that remote area.

Their valuable work and respect and love for them is found in John Flynn's original 1912 report regarding establishing Outback Mission. He writes 'how best to approach the neglected people in the Outback'. ... 'We have the goodwill of the population of Central Australia through our representatives, our Deaconess-nurse at Oodnadatta. Here our work is warmly appreciated. 'Here' – he said – 'we enter the hearts of the people'. Both spiritual and practical nourishment (body and spirit) of the people were to go hand in hand with John Flynn's vision – of life beyond the furthest fences.

These footsteps are the beginning of what is now Frontier Services as well as The Flying Doctor.

Now jump forward to just a few years ago:

Sometimes, in fact often, we look back and see a pattern or strand formed through our journey... linking one thing to another. I see it in the Mission of the church – and the parts I was called into by the church and its mission.

It begins with a little book –I heard Sr Veronica Brady - Loreto nun -from Western Australia speak on Australian literature at Loreto College here in Adelaide. I was stunned and thrilled. Afterwards she suggested I read 'Story about Feeling' a book by Aboriginal man Bill Neidje from Northern Australia and published by Magabala Books in Broome. I thought – 'what sort of place has an Aboriginal Publishing House? One day I want to go there'. Looking back ... this encounter played its part within the footsteps of my own life and that within the church.

Skip now a few years ...

to where I am a Theology student training for Ordination. (Late in life) I was astonished to go as Supply Student Minister to Broome for two months over Christmas holidays. (Christmas 2000) What a time: cyclone Sam hit in the first couple of weeks, I led worship, did pastoral care, and went to Magabala Books of course! On Christmas Day after Broome church worship ... Church Elder Joyce & I travelled two hours in order to lead Christmas worship in the Curtin Detention Centre. I had been there a few weeks before and I was deeply shocked. Now Immigration permission had been given for this service. Around forty people came. The Luke story was read in English, Arabic and Farsi.

Afterwards (Canberra permission given) we baptised an Iranian woman and her 3 children. Yes, she and her family and household were baptised.

Joyce and I left the Detention Centre and drove a short distance then pulled up to have our picnic Christmas meal. Big black and white clouds were rolling in the Kimberley sky – and I can tell you, our emotions were turbulent too! I continued to visit people in Curtin.

Many things happened including visiting Mowanjum Aboriginal community near Derby too.

After two months I came home to finish my studies ... to where my original plan had been to go to country South Australia.

But Western Australian Synod asked South Australian Synod if they could invite me to Port Hedland. 1600 Kms north of Perth. Cut a long story short and I went there for 3 years with the mission of the church ... half-time Church and Town – It was our privilege to have Sharon – a younger Aboriginal woman as Chairperson of the Church. I remember today at the beginning of Reconciliation Week and Sorry Day today. That family embraced me into their family, including me in celebrating birthdays and meeting wider family. It was a ministry of Hospitality. Part of the Ministry was to be on very active Committees in the town including ‘Australians for Reconciliation’ – and ‘Care for Hedland Environmental’ ‘Rural Australians for Refugees’ and ‘Pilbara Legal Services’.

The church was also present in half time Detention Centre ministry , the National church taking seriously the way of Jesus in pastoral and advocating ministry with refugees and people seeking asylum here in Australia. Such a harrowing time for children, women and men locked up for at that time for from three and up to five years. I think of those now on Manus and Nauru.

Here is a painting by a young man in the Detention Centre at Port Hedland. A cruel circumstance of suffering for a young man and all the others. He painted another ... of the suffering hand of Christ .

His painting ... ‘Reaching for Life’ a blue sky – one arm reaching through prison bars – reaching for a single red apple on a bare branch of a tree. ‘Reaching for Life.’

Port Hedland Detention centre closed and the remaining people were sent to Baxter Detention Centre near Port Augusta. The church ministered in that place too. Some of you may have visited the folk there.

I came back to South Australia and footsteps became more like 4-Wheel Drive tyre marks when the church called me into Frontier Services Sturt Patrol based in Orroroo in the

lower Flinders Ranges. I was there for 8 years. But I am leaving it to Rev Sunni when he comes soon to share with you the ministry of Frontier Services today.

I left 5 years ago. Suni's footsteps or tyre marks – and such depth of Gospel ministry cover such a wider area. A huge task for him. But I will say that FS called me back 2 years ago to assist the then Patrol Minister/Bush Chaplain Paul Glazbrook in a community challenge out in the station country. Twice we went together to be available in a chaplaincy role for the local people.

In Frontier Services we did ongoing training and some those sessions were in self care and the prevention of burnout.

At one conference a couple - Patricia and Shayne were speakers. They had a variety of ideas for sustaining a healthy spiritual and physical life and emphasising how relaxing and having fun and a good laugh is helpful for a healthy life when in challenging and potentially stressful circumstances. They have a book: 'You won't die laughing: How to have less stress in your life and more fun'. Among the more serious matters, Patricia paraded around on the stage with hilarious banter. Changing silly hats & generally being silly – as well as her doctor husband giving down to earth advice on self care.

So, what would you like? A silly hat – a Frog Hat – or some sustaining verses from John's Gospel?

Let's have both!

Something tells me not to do this. But here is my Frog Hat especially for Athelstone today. As I put it on, it is very green with very big eyes. We must have a laugh at times to survive!

Now from here – where is the Spirit calling us? To be makers of silly hats? Probably not!

In John's Gospel Lectionary reading which we did not read today, in Chapter 14 Jesus comforts his disciples and promises God will be present with them – it's about love and obedience. Love is the motivation. And Jesus says (among all the challenges) 'My peace I leave with you'. My peace I leave with you" to help sustain them – and we believe the Spirit helps to sustain and compel us.

In the beginning of the church the The Apostle Paul responds to a vision that compels him to travel to Macedonia.

Lydia responds to a vision of new life, and a community is created.

Following in the footsteps of the Apostles we can ask today: How are you and I and the wider church inviting visions of new life and how do we respond to them?

Amen.

Blessing:



Photo

On this cold morning – the image of a Patrol camp fire - and billy tea. Now as you go – may your conversation and meeting – be like ‘the campfire of the heart’.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians may ‘your love overflow more and more with knowledge and insight to determine what is best’ - and - “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit’.

Amen.