

Questions of faith

St Brandon's

Acts 16:9-15; John 5:1-9

22 May 2022

Both our NT and gospel readings this morning raised rather searching questions for me personally about my faith: how it works out in practice; what kind of response I make to God, and so on. Fortunately, one of these questions seemed to me to be more directed to us as Church rather than only to me as an individual – so not quite letting me off the hook, but at least one communal rather than only a personal question.

So I offer these questions this morning, suspecting that for most of you the answer will be something like 'Yes, of course that's how my faith works out in practice!' But if there is even just one question that causes you to pause and reflect, well perhaps you'd like to take that one away and work on it.

Let's begin with the reading from Acts, though actually starting just before our reading began. Paul and his companions, probably including Luke by this point, as the author of Acts, as the 'we' throughout the passage indicates, have received two rebukes from God – they were "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia" (16:6), and when they attempted to enter Bithynia, "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them" (16:7). Then, in our passage, Paul has a vision during the night – so possibly in a dream – of a man from Macedonia imploring them to come. And immediately they try to cross over to Macedonia – so possibly packing up before dawn! – "being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them".

Now this raises for me all sorts of questions about my faith. Am I in a constant state of seeking the will of God for my life? Do I have the kind of relationship with God whereby I would know by His Spirit what I'm not supposed to be doing, and vice-versa, what I am supposed to be doing? Am I alert to visions, or dreams, or more direct means by which God gets His message across to me? And, when I am clear on what I'm supposed to be doing, do I get on with it, or prevaricate and find all kinds of reasons why this can't quite be right, that "it's more complicated than that God, don't you realise", that it will take some time to get organised ...

Mmmm. Well, as I said, probably for most of you the answer to all those questions will be an unqualified 'Yes'. 'Yes, of course, that's how my faith works out in practice'. Well good for you. But if not, perhaps that's something you'd like to take away and work on.

So Paul and his companions make it to Philippi, and once they'd settled in, they choose the sabbath day to go, well interestingly not to the synagogue (Paul had had several run-ins with the Jews in various synagogues by this time), but to the Jewish women who met for prayer by the river. And one of the women in particular, Lydia, who was not a Jew, received the message.

Now we'll come back to Lydia in a moment, but this raised the question for me that was both personal and communal. Am I, are we, committed to passing on the good news of God

in Jesus, remembering that we can do that in any number of ways through our lives as well as through our words? And am I, are we, willing to go where the people are, including those who are not like 'us'; and not expecting 'them' to come to 'us'? What might that mean individually and for us as a Church? More questions ...

But then to Lydia herself. "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to the things Paul was saying". To what extent do I pay attention to what God is saying through the various ways in which God communicates with me? Do I pay attention in sermons? (I said, do I pay attention in sermons?!) Do I read and take on board what God might be saying through helpful books and so on? Do I work out my faith in conversation with others?

Well, as I said, probably for most of you the answer to all those questions will be an unqualified 'Yes'. 'Yes, of course, that's how my faith works out in practice'. Well again, good for you. But if not, perhaps that's something you'd like to take away and work on.

And Lydia, like Paul and his companions, also raise questions for me about how I respond to what I hear and understand God is saying to me. She clearly influences her household (including her husband, perhaps), and they all get baptised, again apparently pretty immediately – no prevarication here. And then she offers, indeed insists on offering, very generous hospitality to these men who until very recently had been strangers.

Am I at all like Lydia? Am I willing to respond immediately to what God is saying to me? Am I, and my household, willing to offer hospitality to strangers? Mmmm.

Well if that's not enough, or so far you've been able to answer an unqualified 'Yes' to all these questions, what about our Gospel reading? The man, let's call him 'Old Grumpy', who never quite manages to get into the healing waters in time, but is nonetheless healed by Jesus.

The first question this passage does not ask is whether it's time to install a jacuzzi! But there was a kind of holy hot tub there: it's been excavated, complete with its five porticos, and was fed from springs – water from below, if you like. And Old Grumpy has been coming there for 38 years. His life, it seems, was based around going to the pool; he presumably begged and was otherwise supported by family and friends, and so continued to exist. But live, flourish, thrive, give out rather than be continually on the receiving end? He's a rather pathetic picture.

And so Jesus's question cuts to the heart: "Do you want to be made well?" Jesus suspects, or knows, that Old Grumpy has accepted a diminished kind of life, and may not want the change, the personal and other responsibilities that would go with living a 'normal' life.

And Old Grumpy's answer side-steps the question – it's a complaint, he's the victim of circumstance, there's nothing he can do about it. And Jesus again cuts right through all the whinging, all the self-victimhood, and simply orders him to stand up and walk. And, to give him his due, Old Grumpy does at least get up and walk away. He's healed physically, but not, it seems, in any other way – he fails to recognise what has happened to him; he doesn't show the slightest gratitude; he (beyond our passage) sneaks on Jesus to the authorities.

There's a lot more healing to go; he remains Old Grumpy even though he's physically healed.

And this story also raises all kinds of questions for me, not least which of the two adjectives (old, grumpy), or both, might apply to me. In what ways do I need healing? Do I want to be made well, or am I really quite content in my current state? Do I see myself as a victim of circumstance, and not really willing to acknowledge or to welcome the intervention of God and what that might mean for my life? Mmmm.

Well, too many questions. But as I said at the beginning, there might just be one here that causes you or us to pause and reflect. And perhaps you / we would like to take that one away and work on it, while I work on all the rest!

Amen