

## CASHMERE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Sunday 26 May 2019

Barbara Sampson

### Bible Readings

Ezekiel 47:1-9

Acts 16:11-14

### Message

Silvia asked me to continue the series she has been doing in the book of Acts and to speak this morning about Lydia. I have to say, it is a challenge to preach a sermon about Lydia. All we know of her is contained in these few verses from Acts 16 that Jill has just read. Lydia, a wealthy woman, a dealer in purple cloth whose heart the Lord opened in response to Paul's preaching. But these verses are a doorway into a bigger story so let's step into it.

On this, Paul's second missionary journey, he has responded to the vision of a man from Macedonia begging Paul to 'Come over and help us.' And so Paul accompanied by Silas and Timothy come to Philippi, a leading city of the district of Macedonia, and here they stay for some time.

During this period of mission there must have been many converts, but Luke mentions only three – an influential businesswoman, a demon-possessed slave girl and a jailer. The stories of these three demonstrate how God breaks down dividing barriers of gender, race and social status.

On the Sabbath, it would be the custom of the missionaries to go to the synagogue, but with this being a Roman city, there was no synagogue. There was even an inscription outside the city of Philippi forbidding any unrecognised religion to be brought into the city. However, there was a place of prayer, as the missionaries expected there would be. It was outside the city gates, less than a Sabbath day's distance away, by a river. The running water would be useful for Jewish ritual ablutions.

On the Sabbath, Paul and his companions join a group of women gathered here by the river for worship and they sit down waiting to be invited to speak. A woman named Lydia (or possibly 'the Lydian lady', named from her place of origin, the Greek district of Lydia) is there, a worshipper of God.

Obviously a wealthy woman, Lydia was a merchant of valuable purple cloth. This was usually worn as a sign of nobility and royalty. As she listened to Paul's message, 'the Lord opened her heart to respond'. The message was Paul's, but the saving initiative was God's. As a sign of conversion, Lydia 'and the members of her household' were baptised. She invited Paul and his companions into her home. In fact, she not only invited, she persuaded them to come.

This is all I would have had to say about Lydia, were it not for a conversation I had in September last year with a Salvation Army officer colleague named Susan. She and her husband were not long back from a trip 'In the footsteps of Paul' to modern day Turkey and Greece with a group of other Salvation Army personnel from New Zealand. When I asked Susan what had been the highlight of the trip for her, her eyes filled up with tears and she said, with quite some emotion, 'The day we visited the place by the river where Paul met with Lydia and other believers from Philippi.'

When I knew that I was to preach this morning on these verses about Lydia, I wrote to Susan and asked her to tell me what it was that had made that visit to that place of Lydia so special for her? This is what she wrote to me: I quote

You asked me why the visit to Lydia's baptistry moved me so deeply. The location setup of the baptistry is lovely. Despite the exquisite fresco and mosaics in the church, outside is simple and at the river it is so peaceful. The devotions shared that day were a reminder of God's call to women into all manner of leadership. This really moved something deep within me. God reminded me of his calling, and the work he has called me to.

Then as I sat with my feet in the freezing water I so wanted to fling myself into the stream. My tears were a deep cleansing for me, a very private baptism. This is the thing that stands out for me, the desire I had to be washed through and through and cleansed for God's purposes.

As I have continued to mull over the occasion I have some regret I didn't just fling myself into that freezing stream. I recall when Simon Peter said to Jesus to not just wash his feet but his hands and head as well, and Jesus answered that, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean." I have had the full cleansing, the water wasn't necessary for all over, but I did need the physical sense of the washing of my feet in renewal.

Then, Susan told me, there was a moment of discernment as she thought back to her training in earlier years to be a midwife, and how, God in these days is leading her into the work of mid-wifing those who are journeying by faith into a new and deeper awareness and experience of God. End of quote.

There is a name for this kind of moment at this kind of place - a thin place ... where the sense of the presence of God is very strong and the veil or the distance between heaven and earth seems very thin, like a fine membrane. For Susan, that river on that day and the story of Lydia was a thin place and it continues to be so.

"A thin place is anywhere our hearts are opened," writes Marcus Borg, 'where the veil momentarily lifts and we behold the "ahaah of The Divine" all around us and in us.'

There is power in thin places.

*Author William Barry wrote that 'We should be aware of the thin places in our lives because they make experiences of God's desire for each one of us, and our desire for God, more possible by capturing our attention and pulling us out of our ordinary routines and concerns.'*

For me, the beach at Island Bay, a suburb in Wellington was a thin place. In the late 1970s my husband and I returned from missionary service in the heart of Africa with a bag full of shattered dreams and we set up home at Island Bay. We had come back to NZ because I was unwell. In order to coax my sick body back to health I drank litres of carrot juice and daily portions of fresh wheatgrass juice. And I walked, every day to within sight of the sea and some days right down onto the beach. Above the cries of the gulls, the pounding of the tide onto rocks, the gentle wash of the waves, I heard a song of healing. 'I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord ... I know the plans. You have a future and a hope.'

In that thin place God healed me and I came to life again.

My colleague Susan's thin place was at Lydia's river. For another friend Ruth her thin place is a cathedral of trees near her home where she goes to pray. Do you have a thin place, private and special just to you? Sometimes we can have a shared thin place where we gather with others, as in a home group. Maybe this church is a thin place for you, as you come here to worship with others on a Sunday morning.

A thin place is where the sense of God's presence comes very close and we know we are not alone.

As well as thin places there are also thin moments, such as when a loved one dies, or in that part of a funeral service when the body is committed to the elements. In that moment it is as if we stand with one foot on earth and one in heaven, the distance between the two realms very thin, very fine.

Scripture, either hearing it or reading it, can be a thin place if we let the words capture our attention and our imagination and lead us into a moment of encounter. Such as when we enter into the passage where Jesus asks the blind man, 'What do you want me to do for you?' and we hear God asking us that very same question, 'David, Anne, Peter ... what do you want me to do for you?'

Thin Scriptures can be favourite passages that we go back to time and time again. For me one such piece of Scripture is Isaiah 50:4: 'The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.' For six years in the early 2000s my appointment within the Salvation Army was to write devotional material that went around the Army world. Every morning I knelt before God and claimed the promise of that verse. Every morning in the thin place of my study I asked God to give me a word to sustain someone's weary soul as they read that devotional.

Do you have a thin Scripture that you go back to time and time again and rest the full weight of your hope upon?

Maybe I'm pushing the image, but I wonder, is there also such a thing as a thin person, not a Jenny Craig kind of thin, but someone in whose presence you instinctively feel closer to God. Upper Hutt - a big supermarket just over the road from a Catholic resthome. Something distinctive, a kind of holy serenity about the sisters I would see now and again in the supermarket. Humility among the hummus, serenity in the sweets section...

Do you know any thin people, whose very presence somehow gives you a sense of the presence of God? There may even be a fragrance about them, something that is hard to define or capture but you know at a deep level that there is a touch of holiness, of God himself about this person. Is it possible that you and I could be a thin person for someone else, bringing the holy One near?

Thin places, thin moments, thin Scriptures, thin people ...

Do you know these gifts?

Maybe this journey starts near a river as it did for Susan, a beach as it did for me, a body of water ... a place of prayer, a holy moment ... a verse of Scripture.

Did you notice the phrase in the reading from Ezekiel - Where the river flows, everything will live ...

So where is your river, your life-giving thin place where God comes near to you? How often do you come? Who do you gather with? What do you bring with you? What invitation from God do you sense and respond to in that place?

May God lead each one of us to our river where we might meet with him as Lydia and her companions gathered so long ago with their prayers and their longings.

**Prayer:**

You come in a moment of stillness  
a gentle presence suddenly there  
stilling calming  
a sense that all is well

You come in the face of a friend  
a word spoken  
a silent touch  
reassuring encouraging  
telling me I am not alone

You come in the beauty of evening  
in the eyes of a child  
a smile from a stranger  
surprising awakening  
God is present

You come in so many ways  
you come  
in stories and songs  
people and places  
overwhelming overflowing  
telling me  
I am loved  
Thank you

**Cause Me to Come**  
by Edward R. Miller

**SOP 28**

*Cause me to come to Thy river, O Lord*  
*Cause me to come to Thy river, O Lord*  
*Cause me to come to Thy river, O Lord*  
*Cause me to come*  
*Cause me to drink*  
*Cause me to live*

*Cause me to drink from Thy river, O Lord*  
*Cause me to drink from Thy river, O Lord*  
*Cause me to drink from Thy river, O Lord*  
*Cause me to come*  
*Cause me to drink*  
*Cause me to live*

*Cause me to live by Thy river, O Lord*  
*Cause me to live by Thy river, O Lord*  
*Cause me to live by Thy river, O Lord*  
*Cause me to come*  
*Cause me to drink*  
*Cause me to live*