

Grand Openings (Acts 16:1-15) – Colin Gale

As we look at the first coming of the good news about Jesus recorded in the book of Acts we find four grand openings created by God.

For the last month or more here at St Luke's, we've been reading the story of how the good news of Jesus gospel spread outward, first from Jerusalem to Judea, then secondly to Samaria, third to Jewish communities in the Roman province of Asia, fourth to the *Gentile* community in the Roman province of Asia, fifthly to Europe, and then sixthly to Rome. And in a sense all this is just the start, because if you've ever read through to the end of the book of Acts, you will know that there is no proper ending to it. The very last verses of the book talk about the apostle Paul living in Rome, opening his home to everyone, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching everyone who would listen about the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a way of indicating that the church of Christ, inspired by the Holy Spirit, will never stop until it really does make it to the ends of the earth.

Each of these six missionary moves was a major psychological hurdle for the early church. Without these moves, Christianity would have remained a Jewish sect. Humanly speaking and in the absence of the Holy Spirit, most likely it would have petered out within a generation. All of us who are not Jews would have remained without God and without hope in the world.

Acts chapter 16 marks the fifth of these outward moves, the move into Europe for the first time. In speaking about verses 6 to 15 of that chapter, the second of the two passages we heard read out this morning, I want to draw your attention to what I am calling grand openings - not one but four grand openings - which can take place as readily today as they did two thousand years ago. But before I do that, I want to take a backwards glance to the first passage that was read, Acts chapter 13 verses 1 to 12.

In this reading, you may remember, the sorcerer Elymas or Bar-Jesus is clearly cast in the role of the bad guy, and it looks as though the apostle Paul has called down a curse on him to strike him blind. What was at stake was the chance the Cypriot pro-consul had of hearing and responding to the word of God. The sorcerer was intent on stopping that happening. Even so, what the apostle Paul says and does seems pretty harsh, at least it seems harsh until we read that the sorcerer's blindness was to be 'for a time'. Elymas is struck blind, not permanently but for a time, so that he had to grope around for someone to lead him.

This is pretty much *exactly* what happened to the apostle Paul at the time of his conversion, as described back in Acts chapter 9, which you may remember the vicar speaking about earlier this month. Paul's own temporary blindness was part and parcel of the momentous change that God brought about in his life. After his blindness came a grand opening, the opening of his eyes. So too the mist and darkness that overcame Elymas was an acted-out parable, designed to highlight his true spiritual state. There is hope for the sorcerer in the fact that Paul says his blindness will only be 'for a time'. Maybe there would be a grand opening of *his* eyes too, so that he, like the apostle Paul and like the Cypriot proconsul, could believe the good news of Jesus, and turn and be forgiven. We never find out from the book of Acts how the story of Elymas ends. Indeed none of us knows how our own story will end; but we do know that, by the grace of God, it is possible for our eyes can be opened to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So there is one kind of grand opening running through the book of Acts before we even reach chapter 16, which is the opening of people's eyes, literally and metaphorically, for them to see their need, and to see the grace of Jesus Christ as the answer to that need. That is how the good news spread from Jerusalem and Judea through Samaria to Rome and beyond. And this is a grand opening that continues to happen for people today as they reflect on their own lives, learn from the Bible and connect with the church: their eyes are opened to the truth about themselves and about the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Then in verses 6 to 15 of Acts chapter 16 we read about four more grand openings that happened then, and have never stopped happening since.

The first grand opening is this: the LORD opened a way. Back in chapter 13, you may remember, Paul and Barnabas were sent on their way to Cyprus, we are told, by the Holy Spirit. Here in chapter 16, we see the flip side of having one way opened, which is to have other ways blocked off. Paul and his companions were prevented by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia, we read in verse 6. So then they tried to enter Bithynia, but according to verse 7 "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to". We have no way of knowing whether this guidance came in the form of some kind of prophetic utterance, from a dream or vision, or else through a juxtaposition of circumstances. We can't be even be sure whether or not they were even conscious, at that point, of *being* led; perhaps it was with the benefit of hindsight that they concluded that they *had* been led.

The dream of the man from Macedonia asking for help, as described in verse 9, certainly confirms them in their conviction of being led, but there is no suggestion that messages from dreams were routinely sought after, or anticipated, by them. If it was important for us to know precisely how Paul and his companions received guidance, in order for us to imitate their practice, we can be sure that Luke would have included these details in his narrative. The main thing Luke wanted to impress upon his readers was not how they were guided, or whether they were conscious of being guided, but simply the fact that they *were* guided, the fact that the Lord opened a way.

This is the first grand opening in this passage, and what it means for us is that we may be reassured that God *will* guide us. Thankfully we don't have to stress about the ways or means by which God will guide us. He will do so whether or not we are conscious of it at the time, and regardless even of whether we can even recognise it with the benefit of hindsight. It will not always be the way we would have chosen, but the Lord will open a way for all his children.

We don't need to worry about failing to discern or accidentally missing out on the will of God. The centre of God's will is this: to love him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. "Whatever you do", wrote the apostle Paul to the Colossians, "whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it in the name", by which he means according to the character, "of Jesus Christ, giving thanks to the Father through him". (3:17). The law of love is the revealed will of God for the transformation of our lives, and it is the work of our lifetimes to be conformed to it. Beyond this, God has a providential will by which he governs the universe and everything in it, which we cannot always discern, let alone frustrate. We may rest assured that he will open a way for us to do, or to endure, whatever he wants us to do or endure, and that he will open a way for us to go, or to stay, wherever he wants us to go or stay.

The second grand opening in Acts chapter 16 is that the Lord opened Lydia's heart to the message of the gospel. Verse 14 tells us that Lydia was one of several respectable, well-to-do and devout Jewish women who gathered to pray outside the city of Philippi near the river. Jewish law required a minimum of ten men for the establishment of a synagogue. No number of women, however god-fearing, could make up this quorum of ten, and in the absence of a synagogue inside the city, an informal meeting-place was found outside. Lydia, however respectable, well to do and god-fearing she was, still needed her heart to be opened to the message brought by the apostle Paul that Jesus was the Lord and Messiah, and it was the Lord himself who opened her heart.

This grand opening is reminiscent of and synonymous with the opening of the eyes of the apostle Paul himself to the truth of the gospel back in chapter 9. John Calvin, the Protestant Reformer, says that “by the word ‘heart’, Scripture sometimes means the mind, as when Moses says [in Deuteronomy chapter 29 verse 4] ‘until now the Lord has not given you a heart to understand’. So also in this verse Luke means not only that Lydia was moved by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to embrace the gospel with a feeling of the heart, but that her mind was illuminated to understand”.¹

It is like the moment that took place in church a couple of weeks ago, when Claire displayed a picture on the screen of indecipherable pink shapes with a white background, but then explained that once you saw the pink as the background, you then see the white shapes clearly forming the word ‘Jesus’. It was a little light-bulb moment, a moment when the penny dropped. Once we saw the word ‘Jesus’, it was impossible for us to un-see it afterwards. This is what it is like for us when the Lord opens our eyes, our hearts and our minds to a new way of seeing, feeling and thinking – the way of the Christian gospel as set out in the Bible and lived out by our fellow believers. It is a definitive change which affects our entire lives from that point on, and from which there is no going back. This grand opening is the principal work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, whether or not we think to acknowledge it as such. Our hearts may have been already opened to this message. We may be seeking a means of obtaining or sustaining this single-minded clarity. In any event, here in church we are in the right place for our hearts and minds to be opened, re-formed and conformed to Christ. One thing is for sure: it’s not within our power to open and change our hearts, it is a work of God to do that.

The third grand opening in this chapter is easy to miss if you’re not looking out for it, but it’s between the lines of the first half of verse 15. The Lord having opened her heart to Paul’s message, Lydia opened her household to the gospel. This is implied in the fact that the members of her household were baptised along with her. Having received the message with gladness, Lydia took it home and shared it with her nearest and dearest, the people she lived with every day. We are not given any of the details about how she did this. There might have been infant children among the number who were baptised on this occasion, for all we know. There’s nothing in the chapter that prohibits that as a possibility, and there’s the Old Testament precedent of Abraham having the infant male children of his household circumcised at the same time he was, as a sign and seal of belonging to God’s family. Lydia might have thrown a baptism or christening party, but if she did the

¹ Calvin, *Acts 14-28*, p. 73.

baptism wouldn't have been for the sake of the party; the *party* would have been for the sake of the *baptism*.

Or, on the other hand, the gospel might have been accepted by those of older years within Lydia's household with whom she shared it. Either way, the fact that Lydia brought her household along with her in accepting baptism is proof that Jesus Christ was the subject of conversation in Lydia's home, and that in having these conversations, Lydia was demonstrating love for the people she lived alongside every day.

They say that charity starts at home, and so it does whenever we speak and act at home in such a way as to promote Christian faith, hope and love. The people who live with us probably know us most intimately. They tend to know what makes us tick, and if we try to put on an act, they can usually spot it a mile off. Have our hearts been opened by the Lord to the gospel, and do we love the people we live with, or if we can't say we love them, do we even like them, if only a little bit? If so, we must find appropriate and genuine ways of opening up our households to the gospel. The previous two grand openings I spoke about are the work of the Lord, but this one is one for us.

The last grand opening in Acts chapter 16 is also to be found in verse 15. Having been baptised, Lydia opens her house to Paul and his companions. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, writes that "she invited us to her home". By the way, the use of the word 'us' there is a little clue that Luke had joined the apostle's entourage by this time. When discussing the comings and goings of Paul, Silas and Timothy at the start of chapter 16, Luke talks about where they went and didn't go, but from verse 10 onwards he uses 'we' and 'us', indicating that he was an eyewitness, along with Silas and Timothy, of the events he proceeds to describe. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord', [Lydia] said, 'come and stay at my house'. And she persuaded us."

This would have been a grand opening indeed, because it is fair to presume that Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, was wealthy, and that her house was large. The manufacture of and trade in purple cloth *was* a thing in the ancient world; it was centred in Thyatira and commentaries on the book of Acts pick up on historical evidence outside the Bible for a guild of purple cloth merchants in Philippi.

We learn from verse 15 that Lydia becoming a Christian changed the way she related to her family – she opened her home to the gospel – and changed the way she related to the bricks and mortar she owned – she opened her house for fellow believers, to come and stay with her and eat with her.

Lydia's motive in inviting Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke to come to her house does not seem to have been to establish the kind of network of social obligation that was part and parcel of Roman society. Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke were living itinerant lives at the time, and it would have been obvious to Lydia that they were in no position to reciprocate her offer. Nor did Lydia invite them to stay because they were old friends from similar social backgrounds who got on well together. It is clear that she had only just met them. The basis for the invitation is there in her words: "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house". She invited them because they were fellow believers. And – this too is important – they accepted her invitation, simply because they were fellow believers. It was not a matter of obligation, or social affinity. They were building a new society which cut across economic and cultural barriers, gender barriers as well, and which was centred on their common faith in Jesus. Part and parcel of doing that was opening, and being welcomed into, each other's homes, sharing food and drink, showing and receiving hospitality, not simply to be sociable but to grow and to strengthen the church of Christ. Lydia does here in chapter 16, Paul did it at the open-ended conclusion to the book of Acts, and Christians have been doing it ever since.

This too is a grand opening for us to emulate. Think of all that God has done for us, and at what a cost. He has opened up a way for us, and he has opened our hearts to a new life, and he will continue to do so. Is it such a hard thing to open our homes to the gospel, and to our fellow believers in Christ? "Let no debt remain outstanding", writes Paul in Romans chapter 13, "except the debt of love".

Actually it can come hard. Not all of us have the gift of hospitality, or of remembering names. Many of us consider ourselves to be shy or private people. If we are at a church that we have been part of for many years, I know it requires a conscious decision on our part to talk to people other than those we have known for years. If we are at a church that is new to us, I know it can be really tough to reach out and begin to form the links that are needed in order to say to one another: Shall we arrange to meet? For some of us there is the practical problem that we do not have the skills to boil an egg, or perhaps we do not have the kind of bricks and mortar that would easily accommodate guests. So we need to think creatively about different ways to apply the 'debt of love' principle.

If we are doing the inviting, let's consider not inviting our friends, our relatives, or our rich neighbours, since if we do, they may invite us back, and we will be repaid. Instead let's consider inviting those who are not in our circle, who are new to the church, or who are in no position to return the invitation, knowing that, if we do this, as Jesus says in Luke chapter 14, we will be blessed.

If we receive an invitation, let's accept it whenever we can, not on the basis of similarity of status, circles of friendship, or how many years we have been part of the church, and without any embarrassment, because we share the same faith in Christ.

If our homes can't accommodate guests, let's meet for a walk. If we don't cook, let's meet for coffee. If we can't afford lunch, let's meet to *not* have lunch, or let's share lunch at church today, whether or not we have brought food ourselves today or whether or not we are particularly interested in the business of the annual meeting. I dare say that there will be enough to go round. Let us find time in our diaries to connect with one or other of the St Luke's, St George's or Christ Church growth communities outside of Sunday morning.

By his Holy Spirit, the Lord has opened a way for us, and he has opened our eyes, our hearts and our minds to believe his message. Let us therefore open our homes to him and to one another, so that together we can grow to know one another better and become more like the church God wants us to be.