

**Sermon: 2019/05/26 (6th Sunday of Easter Day) - Acts 16:9-15;
Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10,22-22:5; & John 5:1-9_BTR**

[Invite children to the front.]

Luke, the author of (the Book of) *Acts*, was "B.F.F.s" with Saint Paul.

Which is why, even though *Peter* is *supposed* to be the most important Apostle - the most important friend of Jesus' *and* the person he should probably be writing about, Luke can't help but "squeeze" in stories about Paul wherever he can.

This is why, last week, we were hearing about Peter having a dream, and then, today, we hear about *Paul* having a dream.

It's a little shameless case of "anything you can do I can do better."

Anyway, just as Peter had seen a vision in which he learnt that the "Good News" about Jesus Christ is to be shared with everyone, irrespective of their skin color or faith or language; so now, accordingly, *Paul* is shown that he was to take that message to Macedonia.

And when they got there they met a rich woman named, "Lydia."

She 'listened eagerly' to Paul's "Good News," and decided that she liked what he said sooo(!) much, she wanted to be a Christian too!

Which is an exciting journey, with many "ups" and "downs," but it begins with something very simple.

[Produce a teaspoon.]

This!

A teaspoon, which is an aide-mémoire for a simple prayer:

T! Thank you for sending your son to take the punishment for my sin.

S! Sorry that I have disappointed you.

P! Please accept me as your "disciple," and fill me with the new life of the Holy Spirit.

(Or something like that.)

Amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

The ancient peoples of the Middle East

- specifically, the ancient peoples of "the Levant"
- that's that (coastal) "strip" of land at the far *eastern* edge of the Mediterranean, which, today, consists of such countries as Israel, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon
- the countries that feature so prominently in the Old and New Testaments
- *those* people had a "love/hate" relationship with water.

A "love/hate" relationship that was a central feature of their culture, religion and worldview.

Some of them - *a minority* - like the Phoenicians, and their cousins, "the Philistines" - were good seafarers: their sailors - like the "Iron Born" in *Game of Thrones* - were "in their element" on the high-waves, and they successfully colonised islands and distant places like North Africa.

But even they stuck close to the shoreline: their boats were shallow and fast - good for "hit n' run" raids. They'd "spit" out some marines to attack villages, and then they'd "dart" away, "hugging" the cliffs; hiding in harbours.

But as much as the lives of that small "minority" depended on such tactics, even they were *very* wary of "The Ocean;" of the open horizon, stretching away to places unknown - perhaps forever?

And this regional characteristic fear can be glimpsed in places in the Bible: both Job *and* the Psalmist, King David, worry a great deal about a massive monster they call "Leviathan," which they thought might be lurking out there in the murky, grey depths.

Best not to explore too far, was the mentality.

Don't push your luck.

Keep your feet on firm ground as much as possible.

And this was especially true for the Jews: it was a rigid, permanent perspective of theirs that endured through many centuries of change, exodus and exile.

Indeed, consider just the Apostles - consider Simon Peter, his brother Andrew; and James and John, the sons of Zebedee: they were fishermen, who plied their trade on the lake of Galilee, [Mt. 4:18-21] which isn't enormous.

Big, yes; but you can see the other side from every other point. A good swimmer could traverse it in a few hours, I imagine. (*Not me*, of course. But a good swimmer.)

And yet, despite its modest size, these men were terrified - *terrified(!)* - when they got caught out in a storm: [Mt. 8:24-25].

Perhaps you imagine this famous moment from the gospels as if it were a scene

from that TV programme about those guys who work the tuna trawlers in the northern Atlantic?

All dressed up in yellow rubber,
in a boat being *thrown* around like drift-wood on *huge* swells as high as a house?
Horizontal sheets of relentless, freezing rain that literally *hammers* the crew so hard that they can barely stand under the onslaught.

Well, if this *is* your mental image you've never been to the Holy Land:

To say that it is *dry* is an understatement.

Like a baked brick in the summer - all red and brown and sterile.

It's a desert!

Right?

Green in winter, a little.

But *not* the rest of the year.

Which is why rivers matter so much!

They are mentioned in some way in all but one of our readings, this morning, in *Acts, John and Revelation*.

In such a parched, thirsty part of the world, the rivers are like blood in the body; they are the center of communities; at the heart of village-life.

They were *busy*, noisy places of activity:

so that '*many*', we hear, were enjoying the "Sheep Pool" where the 'ill' man was healed - a 'pool' on the northern side of Jerusalem, which was the terminus for a small river that snaked down from the north through the Bethesda valley. [Jn. 5:2f.] [n.1]

And this is the reason too that Paul - an enthusiastic evangelist, *as we're supposed to be(!)* - goes *straight* to the river in Philippi.

he knows that *that* is where he'll find an audience.

And in this particular case, it was women 'gathered there', probably, to wash clothes: [Acts 16:13].

One of them is Lydia, and she - 'with her [whole] household' - are baptised: [16:14-15].

Which was *another* reason for Paul to preach where he did:

Because it represents the spiritual reality of Christ's death, which removes the stain of sin if we ask Him for that gift, and undergo the rite that He commanded us to fulfil in His name.

Then, in the final book of the Bible, this important symbol - the river, we see, is at the *very* center of the 'holy city' which God lowers to the earth for His elect - for His "*chosen,*" *for Christians* - to live in with Him forever.

It is at the centre of the city, which is itself the centre of the renewed universe.

We hear that this 'great' river flows from the base of a throne in which Jesus Himself sits - *reigning*, right 'through the middle' and out into all of Creation.

And it nourishes a jungle of ever-ripe fruit-trees that stand on its banks.
What a wonderful image - what a wonderful hope - it is that we have to share with
the nations of the world: our neighbors, friends, and colleagues.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Rousseau, John J. and Arav, Rami (1995), *Jesus and His World: An Archaeological and Cultural Dictionary*, Minneapolis, M. N.: Augsburg Fortress Press, 155.