

## SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY SEXAGESIMAE

(Cape Town - 27 January 2007)

**Text:** <sup>9</sup> During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." <sup>10</sup> After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. <sup>11</sup> From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. <sup>12</sup> From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. <sup>13</sup> On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup> One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. <sup>15</sup> When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us. (Acts 16,9-15)

This captivating story is about the first person who came to faith in Jesus Christ on European soil. As most of us are of European descent, this is really "our" story.

It is a remarkable story in many ways, not least of all because of the centrality of a woman. As men we don't always take note of the prominent role that women play in the Bible. And with the words of Charles Spurgeon, it can make us men somewhat envious that God used a woman, called Lydia, to lead the European band of Christian followers. Indeed, the very first people that spread news of Jesus' resurrection were a group of *women*. And again, it is from the house of a *woman*, that the good news of Jesus spread to Europe.

We want to look at this story in great detail today. As we do, we will see that there are various factors that played a significant role in Lydia's conversion story.

### I

The first one, is the working of God's providence. By "providence" we mean, the way that *God* prepared everything to work out the way it did.

It all started with God bringing Paul and Lydia together in the same city of Philippi. Both of them didn't belong to that city. In fact it seems that Paul on his missionary journey had no intention to cross the sea. We read in the book of Acts that he tried to preach the Gospel in various cities of Asia Minor. But it was the Spirit of God himself who shut the doors. Paul and his co-workers wanted to enter the city of Bithynia (in Asia Minor), for example, but the Spirit wouldn't allow them. So they went to the coastal city of Troas. And it was in Troas that Paul one night had vision. He saw a man from Macedonia, modern-day Turkey, standing and begging him to come and help them. So the next day, Paul packed his bags and crossed the sea to the city of Philippi, where Lydia was.

But Lydia in turn wasn't from Philippi either. We read in our text that she came from the city of Thyatira, likewise in Asia Minor. Thyatira was a city famous for its dyers. And that was the business that Lydia was in. She was a widow. So maybe it was a business that she taken over from her husband. Especially sought after was a purple dye, peculiar - as it seems - to Thyatira. Lydia was trying to sell her purple clothing on the European continent. But she didn't go to Athens, she didn't go to Corinth. God, as we can deduce, led her to Philippi. He had a surprise in store for her. It was there that she was going to meet Paul and become a believer in Jesus Christ.

It is an extraordinary set of circumstances. Lydia had no idea what was going to happen to her in Philippi, and neither could Paul guess. In fact, in his vision Paul saw a "man" calling him over. He didn't dream that the first group of people he would meet on the other side was a group of women.

But that is the way God works. Nothing happens by chance. A great European evangelist tells the story how he as a young man once visited in a small Irish town. Going to church that Sunday evening he was touched by the message of a touring evangelist and committed his life to God - only to discover afterwards that they lived a few streets apart in the centre of London. But God moved both of these men from London all the way to an Irish town because he had a plan for them.

Now, can you imagine that God has a plan for you? Can you imagine that it was God's providence that led you to this congregation? There are other churches in Cape Town. In fact, there are almost 20 churches in Edgemean alone, with far greater preachers than I am. But you are here. One day you felt: This is the service I would like to attend. This is the congregation I want to join! Let me tell you: It is not by chance that you here. God is at work.

## II

That leads us to the second factor: God's working in the life of Lydia.

God wanted Lydia to be saved. Yet, he never works against anybody's will. God makes people willing for him. The way of his grace is, never to violate our will, never to make us do something that we really don't want to do. God himself was preparing Lydia for what was going to happen.

It all started with God making Lydia willing to keep the Sabbath. We read in our text that she was a "worshipper of God". And when she left Thyatira to sell her goods in Philippi, she didn't leave God behind. You know the saying: "In Rome you do what the Romans do." Not Lydia. When the Sabbath came, she closed shop. She wanted to spend time with God, wanted to worship him.

Being a Roman colony, there was no Jewish Synagogue in Philippi. The group of Jews that did gather on the Sabbath Day did so at the river. It was a very, very small group that consisted only of women. This didn't stop Lydia from gathering. She could so easily have excused herself: "This is not my home town. The group is too small." Nor did she say: "I can meditate on a word of Scripture at home." She *wanted* to be there where God's people are.

And interestingly, it was “there” that it all happened. There was this man, named Paul. He started chatting with the women. And we read, that Lydia was one of the women “listening”. She wasn’t “warming the bench”, dreaming about being somewhere else. She listened attentively.

But bringing her to this gathering and making her listen was a God in the process of changing her life, forever.

### III

The third factor we are going to look at, is the working of God in Paul’s life.

I can imagine that Paul never envisaged the river as the ideal place to begin his missionary endeavours in Europe. But he went there where God was leading him. From his perspective the town hall or the market place might have been more ideal to preach the gospel. But God took him there where “he” had already prepared the hearts of people to “listen”.

We can learn something from this. Indeed, sometimes it is necessary to shout the Gospel from the roof tops. But the people that should be sought after first, are those whose hearts God has already prepared. Three weeks ago we listened to the story of Cornelius, the Greek centurion. Peter didn’t just barge into his house. God prepared “both” of them for this encounter.

Here God was preparing Paul: “No, I don’t want you to go there. Go there!” We need to learn to be more sensitised to what God wants. We need to be more quiet and ask him: “Lord, where do you want me to go? Is there someone you want me to talk to?”

As a congregation we need to pray: “Lord, on this Sunday prepare my heart and the hearts of the people, that when your Gospel is preached that our hearts are touched.”

The text doesn’t say, *what* Paul preached? In fact, it didn’t even say that he “preached”. He was holding a conversation. But knowing Paul, he was talking to them about Jesus, the crucified one, and how his own life was changed on the road to Damascus. How suddenly the things of this world, his career, his reputation, his piousness as Jewish Pharisee, wasn’t so important anymore. How having Jesus in his heart, his priorities changed. Maybe you have experienced such a priority change”. It sets you free, free from trying to be more than you. Free from recognition. Free from anger because your demands aren’t met.

God’ “providence” brought Paul and Lydia together. Lydia loved to observe the Sabbath. Paul loved to talk about Jesus. That was a great combination.... And not only one life, but the life of a “household” was changed.

That is the last striking aspect of this text, with which I will conclude. Coming to faith, not only Lydia is baptised but her whole “household”. How does that work? We live in an individualistic society. I go in this direction, my children go in another direction. Not in Lydia’s house. Being the “head of the house” she obviously took responsibility for her house, especially the spiritual life of the people in her house.

This last week I read an article on reaching spiritual maturity? Where does it start? It starts in the own house. The Gospel needs to influence our “homes”. Charles Spurgeon writes: “True godliness has always flourished in proportion as family religion has been observed.” In the family, the foundation of Christian faith is laid.

You may say: “But there is no priest at home”. You are wrong. There is! According to Scripture every man is a priest in his own household. And in the absence of the father, it is the mother, like Lydia. Every house should be a “house of God”. That is where Scripture is read together and prayers are spoken for one another and others.

It wasn't by chance that Lydia's whole household was converted. She didn't do it. God changes hearts. But Lydia had obviously created an environment, where God's Word was heard and the Spirit of God touched the hearts.

Let us be open for God's providence. And let us be priests of our homes. Amen.