

Sunday 27th October 2024. Spread the Word, Catch the fire

Acts 16 Paul's vision of the man of Macedonia

⁶ Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹² From there we travelled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵ 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.

It is a real delight to be together with you for a Sunday of relative normality after the rather hectic last six weeks. When you consider all that has happened with celebrations, snagging, special services and staffing changes, I do want to thank you for your positivity and grace in handling everything – we are even making progress now on the heating!

For the first time in ages this week I was able to go to a 24 hour renewal gathering at the Hayes conference centre in Swanwick organised by our mission partner Resource. For me it felt like a special pause, a chance to enter

a spacious place for reflection after all the extraordinary efforts of the past year. It was lovely to be encouraged by stories of renewal up and down the country and to hear that the Holy Spirit is on the move, preparing the church for greater things to come.



This is a picture I took at the conference of a floor map of England and Wales with tea-lights representing places and churches that are praying for renewal and where Resource had been invited to teach about the work of the Holy Spirit. I was encouraged because many, many faithful Christians and churches up and down the land are looking for revival and praying for the next great awakening to begin. I just pray we will be awake enough to perceive when it begins!

So it seems like a lovely God-incidence that I am speaking on listening to the Holy Spirit today based out of what has come to be one of my life-passages of scripture: Acts 16.

At first glance this 10-verse piece of narrative simply seems to explain how Paul and his companions ended up taking the Gospel to Philippi (which is where Paul later addressed letters to the Philippian church). But there is so much more richness to mine here. I find it fascinating because the passage is rammed with insights about the activity of the Holy Spirit, calling, prayer, salvation, church planting and missiology, which is the study of mission, as well

as human geography and psychology. God has spoken to me on several occasions at key moments of my ministry through this passage.

But as I have prayed about what to draw out just for us this morning, there are three things I want to focus on particularly:

- 1) The prompting of the Spirit
- 2) The unity of the Spirit
- 3) Partnership with the Spirit

The first thing I find fascinating about this passage is that the Holy Spirit prevented Paul and his companions from entering Asia and Bithynia such that they ended up in the port of Troas wondering what they should be doing.

Just to fill in a little background to this story, Paul had had a big bust up with Barnabas at Antioch because Barnabas wanted John Mark to join the team but Paul didn't trust him. So Paul went off with Silas and met Timothy at Lystra in modern day Turkey. But as they travelled northwards they couldn't get into the region to the left which was called Asia, and then the Holy Spirit stopped them from turning right into Bithynia as well.

If you look on a map, you can see clearly what is going on.



Instead of going south into the province of Asia (different from the modern-day continent), or north into Bithynia, the Holy Spirit prodded them towards the port of Troas in the West.

I think if I was Paul I would be wondering what was going on – perhaps horrible doubts entered his mind like ‘Maybe I blew it over that thing with Barnabas - perhaps I have stepped outside my anointing!’ Maybe even other ‘helpful’ Christians had said that to him as well. We do get some indication of the stress Paul was under by the time he did reach Macedonia because in 2 Corinthians 7v5 he wrote ‘When we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn – conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God who comforts the downcast comforted us by the coming of Titus’.

Waiting for God to show up is demanding. If we are tempted to jump the gun and go our own way without pausing to see what God is doing, we could make things worse because God is always seeking greater glory.

But it is totally clear to me that we go through seasons where the Holy Spirit does resist what we think might be good in order to compel us towards what is better.

Why did Paul and the team have to wait? Because from Troas, they took the Gospel to Macedonia, which is modern day Greece and therefore on in to Europe. You and I are possibly only sat here today because the Holy Spirit said No! several times.

I always wonder just exactly what form this Holy Spirit blockage took? Was it a lack of peace on the part of the companions? Was it bandits on the roads? Was it a lack of suitable maps or roads? Or was it perhaps meeting people who simply warned the disciples of a poor local attitude towards visitors?

Whatever happened, Paul and his companions were prodded on to Troas.

They just needed to be patient.

Just after my curacy at St Paul’s in Weston super Mare I was getting excited about church planting and revitalisation but then Mims and I saw an advert in the Church Times for a church needing a vicar down in Southampton. The

advert mentioned Jesus and the Holy Spirit, which if you've ever seen Church Times adverts is something of a miracle that caught our attention. So we went and had a scout around, asked the Lord for guidance whether this might be the right place for us. Lots of things about it seemed logically really good and I started researching the area and having conversations with the Diocese of Winchester. But then the strangest thing happened. On several consecutive days I found myself humming tunes whilst in the shower. Embarrassingly they were all 80s hits but the first one was 'The only way is up' by Yaz whose chorus is '*hold on*', then there was Bon Jovi's 'living on a prayer' where it says 'We've got to *hold on* to what we've got...'

Then the next day I couldn't get a Trent Vineyard worship song called 'hold on' out of my head.

I told my prayer partner Luke about it and would you believe it, the only way is up came onto the radio in his van just as I was telling him about it. Luke turned to me and said 'Do you know what, I think God might be saying 'Hold on'!

Good as the prospect of working in Southampton might be, the Holy Spirit was preventing us going there. And now I realise why – God was preparing something even better for us in Weston-super-Mare. I had to wait another 9 months but it was right for us to lead a church planting team to Locking Castle. But it is better to wait than to run ahead of God. Oftentimes in the Bible people got in trouble for jumping God's gun. Just think of Saul for a sobering reminder to be patient.

So whether the Holy Spirit is prompting you or actually prodding or preventing you, be patient and his better plan will become clear.

So that's the **prompting of the Spirit**. The next thing is the **unity of the Spirit**.

Another thing I love about this passage is too easy to miss unless someone points it out to you:

In verse 8 it says '*they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.*'

Then verse 9 describes Paul's vision of the man of Macedonia.

Then there is a subtle shift in verse 10:

'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.'

There is a shift from **they** to **we**.

There is probably a practical explanation for this – that Luke joined the team in Troas. But even if he did I think there is a Spiritual truth here that Holy Spirit inspired vision pulls God's people together with a united purpose of sharing the life and message of Jesus.

When you describe what is happening at All Saints do you find yourself saying 'we' or 'they'? It is a good test of whether you are experiencing the unity of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit pulls his people together.

There is a lovely book called 'Voice in the night' by a pastor from Mozambique called Surprise Sithole. He was miraculously called by God to tell people about Jesus and had to leave his witch-doctor home. One day in 1995 he met Heidi Baker only very briefly after she had been speaking at a meeting. He wrote 'I assumed that this meeting would be the sum of my association with Iris ministries, but a few weeks later Heidi showed up in a dream. I saw her standing on a hill and calling to me, "come over here. We need you!" A few nights later I had a similar dream. This time Heidi stood on top of a tall building, again calling for me to come and help. Both dreams were so vivid that I knew God was talking to me, and so I made plans to travel to Chihango, a community about 20 miles from the capital Maputo. He arrived just as the Bakers were being evicted by the government and Surprise found himself negotiating with officials on their behalf because he spoke the native language, and he ended up staying with Iris ministries right up to the present day.

So we have the Prompting of the Spirit, the Unity of the Spirit and finally I want to mention Partnership with the Holy Spirit.

Another thing for us to notice this morning is all about what happened when Paul and his companions reached Philippi and went to the place of prayer.

It is worth noting that prayer was the first thing Paul and his companions did when Christianity entered Europe. Prayer is the foundation of Church growth – a platform for Holy Spirit encounters.

Look what happened when Lydia heard the message. Verse 14: *'The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.'*

This is partnership with the Holy Spirit.

Our part is to preach the Gospel, the good news of God's love for each one of us offered freely through faith in Jesus Christ.

But God has a part to play in salvation too. He is the heart surgeon. He opened Lydia's heart to respond to the message.

So the kingdom grows through a dynamic partnership of us praying and preaching, while the Holy Spirit opens the hearts of those he is calling.

This is the dynamic partnership that grows of the Kingdom of God, and sometimes it can be confusing.

On the one hand Jesus taught that the Kingdom is something that grows all by itself: He said

"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain.

Clearly the Kingdom of God is living and active and it grows, with or without us.

But then he also instructed us to make every effort to spread the word and catch the fire:

In Matthew 28, at the great commission Jesus said 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, son and Holy Spirit'.

So the Kingdom of God grows through a partnership of God's sovereignty and our activity. But growth happens most effectively when we keep in step with the Spirit.

In John 5v19 Jesus explained it this way: 'I only do what I see the Father doing'

How do we see what the Father is doing?

John 'I tell you the truth, no-one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again...unless they are born of water and of the Spirit'

To be in partnership with God and see the Kingdom of God grow through us we need to be born of the Spirit. To have our eyes opened to the presence of the Holy Spirit, the power of the Holy spirit and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. To be born of the Spirit means recognising that the Holy Spirit is not simply an impersonal force of nature but a personality who has purpose and wants us to listen to his promptings.

You never know what will result simply from your patient willingness to wait on the Lord and partner with the Holy Spirit. Sharing the little that the Lord does show you could dramatically change the world.

So we've looked at being alert to *the prompting of the Spirit*, the *unity of the Spirit* which occurs when we seek to follow God's plan together, and finally we see that working in *partnership with the Spirit* is the key to growth and seeing the Grace of God transforming the lives of those around us.

So let's wait on the Lord now and ask him to prompt us with how he wants us to respond.