

# We need to be awake to God's call

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Easter 6 – Acts 16 9-15; Ps 67; Rev 21 10–22 5; John 5 1-9

In the National Church Life Survey, there's a question that asks us, *'How often during church services do you experience Inspiration, Joy, Awe or Mystery, A sense of God's presence, Growth in understanding of God, Being challenged to take action, Being strengthened spiritually?'* These are the sorts of experiences we see happening in today's readings. They're filled with hope in God's power. Yet they're not questions we often ask ourselves. Our Zoom study group pondered similar questions last Tuesday and it was a very precious time of sharing.

In our part of the Anglican Church, talk about visions from God, seeking God's direction and sensing God's presence can seem to some of us as though it's a different dialect. Same basic language, but expressions we don't tend to use. It means we can be puzzled by symbolic language and imagery like the book of Revelation uses, while such things seem to speak directly to *other* Christians.

Is the sense of God's presence and power in the book of Revelation more the province of pentecostal and charismatic worship? No. In our prayer together, we also ask God to intervene in our lives and in the affairs of the world. The music and singing in our worship takes us to that place too. And sharing communion is the most important thing for many St John's folk. So our language is symbolic too.

*How often during church services do you experience Inspiration, Joy, Awe or Mystery, A sense of God's presence, Growth in understanding of God, Being challenged to take*

*action, Being strengthened spiritually?* Quite often, actually.

I remember as a teenager hearing preachers who said how wrong it was just to be a Sunday Christian – to pray and sing about peace and love and good will and be near God one day, then go out the next day and dance to the tune of a cruel, competitive world. That tension's still true today. And it's not meant to be that way.

Our gatherings are meant to help us recall that our *whole lives* are lived in God's presence. We learn songs and hymns and prayers so we can take them everywhere with us. Our prayers are about justice and mercy and faithfulness and we're called to take them out with us so we make a difference. What we do here shapes us to keep the conversation with God active at all times and wherever we are. But it's one thing to say that we want to practise God's presence in our daily lives; it's quite another to do it. That's where our scriptures come in; they model this discipline.

In today's episode from Acts, Paul, Silas and Luke follow God's leading in very challenging circumstances. They've been in south and central Türkiye visiting some of the young churches they'd founded earlier. They long to carry their mission into other parts of Türkiye too. But the lead-up to today's passage sees the Spirit veritably herd them across Türkiye to its north-western seaboard, repeatedly preventing them from going elsewhere. They get herded to the port city of Troas (a little south of Troy and Gallipoli), and there, one night, Paul is given a vision of a Macedonian man pleading with him to come to help them.

Paul and the others respond immediately, sailing across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia. There they seek out the sort of people who pray. And today, we see them find a group of women who gather to pray outside the city. Luke calls people like these women 'God-fearers'; that means they're people who aren't Jews, but they are attracted to the Jewish idea of the

one-God-over-all.

These women pray together. But they do it out of the public eye, likely for fear of persecution by the Romans. Our story tells us that this secretive little group of inquirers has caught God's attention. One woman in particular, Lydia, responds to Paul's and Silas' teaching by accepting Jesus and being baptised together with her household. She and her household have become the bridgehead of Christianity's first arrival in Europe. I marvel at all this, but maybe I shouldn't. Now that the Church has so much more experience of the work of the Holy Spirit, why should we be surprised any longer that the prayers of Lydia and her friends are heard by God. Why should I marvel that God sends Paul and Silas and Luke a thousand kilometres over land and sea in answer to the prayers of a small group of women.

It's Luke's grand theme of people joining in God's mission. And when God calls us to join in, that call brings with it an invitation to begin something new; something you could hardly have predicted. We at St John's need to be awake to God's call. What's God's mission to the people of this parish district, and how are we meant to get on board? Like Paul, we're on a journey. And like him, we're sometimes confronted with dead ends. Where do we turn then? Is anyone among us being given a dream; a vision? It's a different dialect, but it *is* our language. So let's give this dialect a try. Maybe we need to wait for a dream, wait intentionally. Maybe someone's already been given a dream. Either way, we're called to discern God in it, and if we do, we're to be obedient and follow where the dream calls us. Amen