

Reflection for 22nd May (Easter 6)

Have you ever set out to do something, only to find that for reasons beyond your control you end up doing something quite different? It's an experience which happens to all of us at some time or other. "Come over to Macedonia" was the summons that came to the apostle Paul in the midst of his careful planning about where next to take the Gospel message. He thought he knew where he was going, but in a vision he became convinced that he should turn his attention to somewhere else: to a region he had not previously considered.

Well, alright, you might say – but why should we be interested in a slight change on Paul's plans for his missionary journeys? The significance for us of this story from the Acts of the Apostles is that it marks the first occasion on which the Gospel was brought to Europe. Paul's readiness to change his plans paved the way for the spread of the Gospel to an entirely new continent. So, in a way, his decision has affected us all.

In a wider sense, however, we could say that the story in the 16th chapter of Acts is really all about the power of God to bring about new things. Not only does it describe how Paul began to share the Gospel in places he had not even thought of, but it also tells us how the life of one woman, Lydia, was changed as a result of his visit. This passage speaks to us of the new possibilities that God offers to those who are prepared to rise to his challenge. It reminds us that Christians throughout history have constantly been surprised by the new possibilities that God unexpectedly opens up before them – and by the strength he also supplies for them to meet those new possibilities.

It is part of God's nature that he is always doing new things – and very often these new things come as a surprise to us. Our human tendency is to want to stick with what is familiar, to hang on to what we know, to keep to things that are tried and tested: changes, we feel, should only come about when they are absolutely unavoidable. Unfortunately, God's way, as revealed to us in the Bible, does not correspond with our understandable human reluctance to change. His way is very often to tell people to set off, without warning, in a totally new and unexpected direction. Sometimes he gives them reassurance about why they have to do this: but sometimes he doesn't – and that is what faith is all about – launching out into the unknown and simply trusting in God.

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