

An Address by Ash Leighton Plom, 18 October 2020

Jehovah Rapha, O Lord our healer, as we remember St. Luke, a doctor and evangelist, heal us, we pray, and fill us with your Spirit, that we may be moved into ministry to others, bringing healing, wholeness, and life, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Good morning, everyone! How are we? I'm not so good, actually. I went to the Dr. the other day: I said, "Doctor, Doctor, I think I swallowed a pillow." The Doctor said, "How do you feel?" I said, "A little down in the mouth" ...

Look, sometimes, that's how it is: life just keeps thwarting you. And that's what I want to talk about today. Life, so it seemed, kept thwarting St. Paul and his companions in our reading from Acts.

They keep trying to go to this place or that place to share the gospel, but they keep getting thwarted. The start of the reading finds Paul and his companions (Silas and Timothy) travelling "throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia". 'Throughout' is a big word. Phrygia and Galatia are big places. They're basically most of the middle of what is now Turkey. If you can visualise the country of Turkey, there are some long, thin provinces around the coasts, and Phrygia and Galatia are in the middle, the interior of the country.

One of my favourite stories is from Phrygia: The Gordian Knot. Have you heard of it? It's sometimes used as an analogy for an impossible problem... Legend has it that this knot was so tightly entangled that it was impossible to unfasten. A prophecy had declared that anyone who could undo the Gordian knot was destined to conquer a great empire. And so generals, mathematicians, philosophers, politicians, all sorts came and tried to undo this knot, but to no avail. It's just too tangled and, well, knotty.

And then Alexander the Great Arrives. They tell him this oracle, that whoever undoes the Gordian knot will conquer a great empire... So, Alexander thinks for a moment, and then he just draws his sword and *Shlock!*, he cuts the Gordian knot in two. That's one way to solve a knotty problem!

But Paul and Silas and Timothy, in our reading from Acts, don't experience that kind of immediate breakthrough. On the contrary. the scripture has them working hard for the Lord, in this harsh, arid region... Picture it: hot summers, cold winters, it's high up, sparse, crops don't easily grow there... Envision something a bit like Dartmoor, but really hot and dry...

We know from elsewhere in Acts and from Paul's epistles that Paul and Silas and Timothy travel this area from town to town. So it's a slog. A hard, demanding slog. On Sabbaths they go to the synagogue to speak. And notice this word "they" at this point: Paul, Silas, and Timothy, named just earlier in Acts. So, on Sabbaths they go to

the synagogue to speak, and on other days, to the market, to tell anyone who'll listen to the Good News about Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

Paul explains Bible history, from Exodus to the Incarnation. He explains that Jesus is the heir of David: he quotes from the Old Testament to show that Jesus is the promised Messiah who brings forgiveness for sins, and he proclaims the facts of Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension...

Some of his hearers believe and become Christians, but some reject and persecute them, and so they're driven from town to town, Paul, Silas, and Timothy...But they labour on, in this slog, travelling from place to place, preaching this message.

But even after all this sweaty labour, remember they're kept from going where they wanted to go. It says they're kept from preaching the word in the province of Asia. And I should make clear that the province of Asia is not the continent of Asia. The province of Asia, in 1st Century Roman terms is again just part of what is now Turkey, namely the western end: Izmir, Ephesus, Bodrum, Marmaris, across the Aegean Sea from Greece.

So, Paul, Silas, and Timothy come from Phrygia and Galatia in the middle, inland, they try to go west, but are stopped, and so they turn north to Mysia, and again, as they're about to try east into Bithynia, along the 'top' of Turkey, along the Black Sea coast, again they're prevented from going where they want to go.

Now, all the Scripture says is that the Holy Spirit keeps them from preaching in the province of Asia, in the west of what's now Turkey, and the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to enter Bithynia, in the East.

Two tries to get to places they'd planned to go, two no-goes, scripturally straight from the Lord.

Sometimes that's what life is: one attempt after another to go forwards, only to be blocked or turned aside. Imagine their frustration! I imagine they must have been frustrated. And... in the end, the only route open to them is north west, over the sea to Macedonia, into Europe. Not where they had planned on going.

But it was where God had planned on them going. I'll say that again: they ended up exactly where God had planned on them going. They came to the border of Mysia, and during the night Paul has this vision of a Macedonian standing and begging him, "Come over to us and help us." And so after Paul had seen the vision, he and his companions leave at once for Macedonia, as God had called them to preach the gospel there.

Now, notice that here in the reading "they" changes to "we" and "them" to "us" at this point, and that's why it's the set reading for St Luke's day. Acts is traditionally credited to Luke, mentioned for example in Paul's letter to the Colossians as a

physician and beloved companion. And this is the moment when Acts goes from a second-hand history which Luke wrote down from other people's accounts given to him, to where it becomes his first-hand travel account, where the writer himself steps into the narrative, oh so subtly, as one of the companions of Paul.

So, if Paul, and Silas, and Timothy hadn't been kept from going to the province of Asia or along the north coast to Bithynia, possibly they'd have never met Luke. And we wouldn't have the Book of Acts. We wouldn't have Luke's Gospel. We wouldn't have the parable of the Good Samaritan – that's unique to Luke's Gospel. We wouldn't have the parable of the Prodigal Son – that's unique to Luke, too. We wouldn't have all the material Luke and Acts gives us that the other Gospels chose not to include... What I'm saying is that God was in the delays, so that Paul, Silas and Timothy could make their appointment with St Luke, that they didn't even know they had!

So I take some comfort from this reading today. Sometimes, it feels like you're being stopped from going here or there, doing this or that. This whole year, really, and I think it's likely to get tighter over winter, we've been restricted in what we can do, where, and with who.

But I want to suggest to you today, that you can trust that wherever you end up, keep following the Spirit, keep listening for God's call, and wherever you go and whatever you do, even if it isn't what you had planned or hoped for: this is where God planned for you to be.

Just before I was ordained, I went on a Zoom retreat, as some of you will have read in the parish magazine, copies available here in church or on our website if you haven't got yours yet. And on this retreat, the facilitator reminded us powerfully that even if this isn't the start to curacy me and my colleagues had hoped for, God knew it in advance, chose us for these parishes at this time.

Likewise, God has chosen you for this moment. It's not what any of us had planned, but it's where he's put us, where he's called us to. So let's use it for his glory. Let's listen for his voice, follow his Spirit, help one another however we can, call each other, volunteer for things if you can, and get praying!

And just as God blessed Paul, and Silas, and Timothy, and Luke – and through them, blessed us, just as God blessed them in their redirecting, he is going to bless you in your redirecting as well.

So, may we be people who stop, and turn, when the Spirit says stop. May we be people who dream dreams and see visions like Paul and respond to God's call, because the harvest is plentiful and we are all of us here needed as labourers. And so may we know that he is with us wherever we are, today, this month, this autumn, this winter, he is blessing and guiding us. Amen.