

Sunday 18th July. 10.30am.
Building: Outreach: Belonging x29.

Ground breaking

Acts 16:11-30

Intro CD: Bernard Cribbens “ Hole in the ground.” (Plus Power Point:PP)

PP#1 The series this year is looking at Building Outreach and Belonging.”
BOB

PP#2 If you go to the 2012 Olympics web site (the link is on the power point) you can see how the stadiums, parks and villages are being built. The picture on the screen is the aquatics centre, which we went round as a church in February 2010. At that time it had several big holes under the canopy that have now become swimming pools.

I go up sometimes on to the Greenway which over looks the site to watch the multi billion pound machine carving, scraping, shaping, pouring, fixing and assembling the Olympics together.

This takes a lot of skills: thousands of hours for architects, engineers, financiers and designers to plan it. Different skills to demolish what was there re-locate the people and businesses, clean the contaminated soil. But this isn't just about preparation. It needed different skills competences, knowledge's, and experiences to get on with building the thing.

PP#3 Week by week we come to church. We plan, shape, maintain and develop our worship, our buildings- the stuff we do and get involved in. God is in the business of people rather than buildings. It is a slower, more protracted and difficult process as it requires our active co-operation. Love does that – it waits and keeps on plugging away. That, as we walk with God, we should grow to be more like Jesus with the same passions, concerns, yearnings and commitment that God has for His world – for He has gifted, by grace, us with His Holy Spirit , the Spirit of Jesus into our lives for this to happen.

Yet it is not just about growing deeper. Yes our believing is about a strengthening, a maturity, a growing up as followers of Jesus in being disciples. The Christian life too is a series of “conversions” , of changing our minds and seeing things differently. Moving from “me and my God,” to “us and our God “and the painful (as well as joyful) process of understanding how to build and maintain and strengthen Christian community. Our strap line as a church is “by being a living community of faith, love and service.” Any living thing grows. So we, as we think about ourselves , our service, our call, our purpose and mission in our shared life together we need also to think about not just growing deeper but bigger.

This is then about outreach and I want us for a few moments today to think about the place and the people God has put us with. We will do this through looking at what happened at Philippi where Luke describes how a church was started from scratch. We have a slight advantage in that a church has been here for 142 years, but there are lessons, I think, we can learn to encourage us in our responsibilities.

PP#4. The first thing to note is that we are wobbling about in a post recession recovery and possibly a double dip recession. Resources are tight. The Education minister Michael Gove provoked ire at the cutting of the schools building programme but in many ways this is but a straw in the wind. This week was the deadline set by the Treasury for departments to send in outline plans for cuts for the October spending review. Not a single department met that deadline.

Charities, shops, mission agencies, tour operators, churches see a decline in giving and spending as people tighten their belts. This is not without good reason as for most of us money will be tighter and less of it with the austerity measures that lie ahead.

Resources cut. Sails trimmed. Expectations down graded. Things will take longer than planned, other things shelved. Services cut or reduced or once free provisions will need paying for now. Some things moth balled. We will have to work harder, longer for less. Not all of us – but some of us.

Yet while we can't ignore what is going on around us, and it does affect us, I would like to suggest that rather than putting on the brakes, we should rather be raising our expectation of breaking new ground. God at Philippi broke new ground. The first church in Europe. The first member a foreigner from Asia.

PP#5 Faith

God has given us resources. We need to fulfil his plan and design and purpose for this church in this place at this time. All the resources of heaven find their “amen “- so be it – in Christ. It's not a lack of resources it is what we decide to do with them. Our trust, our obedience, our commitment, our passion, our interest. Yes we are thin on the ground. Yes some of us are getting old or are old. Some of us are too young, too busy, too stretched, too struggling, not enough time, too many commitments, spread too thinly. Too much to do- not enough time to do it. Yes, but God has given has not just given us each other but of Himself.

The evangelisation of Europe began with four people visiting a retirement settlement for Roman soldiery and a centre for a worship cult beyond the “end of the road.” The great ancient motorway, the Ignatian Way, ended at Neapolis nine miles away. There are more then four of us here.

Focus

Believing God is in the business of seeing people coming to a living faith in Jesus. You did! That's why you are here today, or maybe you're here because you are curious and are yearning to make this really real in your own life.

Living faith means building on past victories and growth but not continuing to exist by trading on that but by building on it. Breaking new ground. Often when we think about outreach or sharing our faith by being and telling what it means to know and follow Jesus we focus on how hard it is, how inconsistent and feeble we can be.

Just for a moment think about it from the other persons, even God's point of view. We can become a door way for others to see Jesus for themselves. Rather than grumpy gate keepers, we are willing hosts and midwives where people are thrilled and overcome by experiencing God's hospitality and new birth for themselves. Jesus says that there is more joy in heaven when sinners repent (*Luke 15:7*)

Courage

Having courage: this is not a lack of fear but in spite of our fears doing what we know is right and trusting God to help us getting stuck in and sticking with it.

Read the letters of commendation in *Revelation* to the churches of this area (including *Thyatira* – the home of Lydia). It is those that overcome in the face of being overwhelmed that are commended. In *Revelation 2:26-28* Jesus says

“you must hold firmly to what you have. To those who win the victory, which continue to the end to do what I want, I will give them the same authority that I received from the Father.”

We may look power less and in fact may often be powerless, but we are not defeated. Nor are we without power to change the future. We are invited to be change makers with God. The same power (the Third person of the Trinity) that raised Christ from death - is in us.

PP# 6 Breaking new ground in outreach is not easy. I think, personally, it is getting harder, It's a tough task. But how do you approach tough tasks? Are you someone who just has a go to see if it works, when it doesn't, or doesn't work well, you get discouraged and give up? Or are you someone who keeps trying till it does work?

Are you someone who gets/lets someone else to do it? May be pay a professional to do it for you?

Do you think about it? Get some advice and support? Do you check out Wikipedia or stuff on the internet? Maybe get someone to help you work at it

together, or get some training. Are you someone who might do something really radical and actually pray about it?

PP#7 Luke wrote not just Luke but Acts. In *Acts* Paul is obviously a bit of a hero for Luke and if you read carefully from verse 8 to verse 10 in chapter 16 “they” becomes “we.” That happens on a few occasions in *Acts* where Luke is not simply telling the story, he is in the story. So when we look at what happens in Philippi as a “tough task” and as a case study to help us in our “tough task” it is from the perspective of an eye witness.

There are three parts to this story, which illustrate how the good news of Jesus penetrated every part of Philippi central. We are primarily going to look at one of them today, and just note the others for a future talk.

The three areas we will consider are:

- ❖ Where are the places of encounter?
- ❖ Who or what are the points of resistance?
- ❖ Dealing with unintended consequences.

PP#8 In **breaking new ground** we will look at

Lydia

Finding the encounter places - and note:

The slave girl

Dealing with barriers, obstacles, constrictions, unhealthy alliances

The jailer

Sharing while suffering not escape but engagement.

PP#9 Firstly Lydia. In some ways this is reminiscent of another breakthrough moment with the move of the good news from including just the Jews to include ancient enemies – the Samaritan heretics. Of another woman by water, this time a well, and a conversation and dialogue that opened a door. In *John 4* Jesus begins by crossing boundaries asking for a drink from someone ordinarily that normal Jews would not even speak with, let alone handle an item they had touched.

Here in Philippi Paul, the great Pharisee of his past would have daily repeated “O God, I thank Thee that I am neither Gentile. Nor slave. Nor woman” finds in a place of prayer by the river not a man to speak with but a woman to teach and converse with. It is the change Jesus has made that makes possible the changes that need to happen.

Ordinarily Paul is a man with a plan. If you plot his journeys on a map you can see the strategic centres he works with- key centres of communication, trade, political life. His normal tactic was to go to the synagogue first and speak with

fellow Jews and the fringe of God fearers. This, in my view, was quite deliberate. **Who are those nearest to you in culture, thought, sentiment and history? Where are those with whom you can communicate most easily? - Who you understand and sympathise with? - To whom you have shared convictions, connections and sympathies? Who, unlike people less like you, are probably more likely to listen? And want to listen? We start there, but we don't end there.**

But Paul was not just a man with a plan. Even with a strategic planning brain like Paul. He was also someone who listened and responded to the guiding and direction of the Holy Spirit. So this encounter at Philippi begins in Asia not Europe, where they bypassed Lydia's home town of Thyatira because "*the Holy Spirit did not let the preach the message in the province of Asia*" – or Bithynia because "*the spirit of Jesus did not allow them.*" At Troas Paul has a vision of a Macedonian (A Greek and on a different continent- Europe). More long journeys to get to the roman colony of Philippi - where they then rented some rooms.

It was not a promising city. It was a tough task. There were very few Jews in Philippi. Less than ten men over 13 years old. If they had that many they would have had a synagogue – but they didn't. So they found the place where they might begin to encounter people who were thinking, reflecting, questioning, and worshiping people. People who were interested in talking and open to thinking about the claims of Jesus. They went to the river. The banks of the River Gangites where a number of women (Jewesses and God fearing Gentiles), came together for the Jewish service of prayer on the Sabbath.

Lydia was unusual in being a very wealthy - a "fashion designer" as imperial purple was very specialist and expensive. She opened not just her heart, but her home to the four friends and this is where they stayed for the remainder of their time at Philippi. It continued to be a generous church. Paul later wrote "*You Philippians know very well that when I left Macedonia in the early days of preaching the Good News, you were the only ones to help me, you were the only ones who shared my profits and losses.*" Grace and generosity often go together.

Yes it was thrilling to be in the right place at the right time. It was thrilling that Lydia, despite her wealth and Jesus saying how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God received gladly and deeply who Jesus is and what he has done. She received God's love, forgiveness and redemption and the gift of life itself - eternal life. She was like the blind man, knowing that once he was blind but now he could see. Seeing the world with new eyes - thrilled, generous, grateful, stirred and changed.

PP#10 But let us not forget that this ground breaking moment involved a back breaking journey. Nights of prayer and struggle, risk and vulnerability- and more were to come.

God's appointment

The Olympics and its legacy will take a decade to build and put in place. God deals in life times and life time moments. God has put you in this place, in your situation. When Paul ended up in a Roman prison he did not say he was the emperor's prisoner but a prisoner for Christ. You are, we are, God's representatives where God is looking to work with us, as he did with Paul and his companions in a ground breaking way. You may think you are where you are because you chose to be, or others chose for you. Not so. You are there at God's appointment. Are you awake? Are you ready?

As a church we are developing an Outreach Strategy. It's a mix of planning and allowing God's Holy Spirit to have the first and the final word. We are creating a team to help us. We are looking (as in Paul's Macedonian vision) calling for others to help us.

Looking around us

Like Paul in Philippi we are looking around us. Where are the first and easiest points of connection? Through prayer and reflection we have identified six local housing areas around us. All different, while sharing some similarities.

I am going to ask you to stand and turn to where you think these areas are in relation to this church (or sit and point if you are unsteady on your pins). I'm staying where I am. If you don't know, or are not sure –are you interested enough to find out?

- Lanfranc estate
- Antill Residents Area
- Cranbrook Estate
- Driffield residents Area
- Ranwell West Estate
- Olympics

We are developing prayer and outreach ideas and initiatives on top of those we are doing and have been doing. The Holiday Club is a part of that - I hope you will all be praying for this. This is a tough task and as we will see when we look at the slave girl and the "python spirit" and the callous jailer it might be an even tougher task than you think. But it starts with you and me being willing and available.

At the end of the Flame Sheet we have a few questions. I am aware that the groups are not meeting this week and these are the kind of questions best discussed and mulled over – nevertheless....

I leave you with these to think about, pray about, weigh and consider. Ground breaking is a tough task but it was never mean to be done alone in God's economy.

PP#11 The first question is

Think of the closest person you know who is not a Christian

- How can you share a conversation about matters and belief and conscience?
- What questions might they have about Jesus and faith?
- What barriers and obstacles stop you talking with them ?
- What would encourage you to pray for them and others to pray for you as you relate to them?

The second question is

PP#12 What is your primary place of outreach and service?

- What sort of community is this?
- How can you find out more about the people that are there?
- How can you improve connections with these people?
- Are there other Christians linked to this community that you might pray and share with?

May God continue to help us as we look to follow and serve Him.