

## St Columba, Easter 6

### A Mothers' Day in the Easter Season

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Acts 16:9-15

John 14:23-29

The Mother's Day Proclamation 1870, Julia Howe

#### **Introducing the text**

The key text for this morning, Acts 16:9-15 is one of those 'window texts' as I like to call them. It lets us in to some of the historical data as well as social context that Paul, the great missionary, was engaged with.

In this Luke tells us that Paul, following another of his dream-visions, sets off into unknown territories – he launches out from Lystra, moving through the area known then as Asia, and which we know as Turkey, beyond the familiar regions, and into Europe for the first time. He stops at Philippi. There is already a group of Gentiles there who worship God and this is Paul's first encounter with them. He has moved out of the culture where Christianity, the new religion, originated and into foreign places...in Europe – and the stories of Jesus and the different way of living out God's promise has preceded him!

Now he meets his first group of these people who worship God. He meets them outside the city gates; they are not members of the church. And they are all women!

The reading from John shoots us back to prior to the crucifixion and we eavesdrop on a conversation between Jesus and Judas (not Iscariot the reporter is at pains to tell us in the text). We hear Judas question Jesus about why Jesus is prepared to reveal himself to the inner group but not to everyone – I guess we can all relate to that! Jesus goes on to say that those who love him will take seriously what it is he is letting them know about himself – there is trust at stake here. It is an introduction to the gifts the Spirit will bring at Pentecost, when Jesus is no longer around in person. In a way this text is part of preparing us for Pentecost which we will recognise in couple of weeks. It introduces us to the idea that peace is a right response to the love of God.

Today I want to focus on the Acts reading as helps us continue the theme we have been exploring in this Easter season of what it means to be part of the post-resurrection community of life – how should we live?

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## **Mothers' Day today.**

A day to remember and be thankful

thankful for the life given to us by Mothers

thankful for the nurture that mothers provide.

It is a good thing to pause and acknowledge the roles and responsibilities our society expects of women – they are complex.....

Mothers' Day has antecedents way back in the mists of time; in the honouring of the goddesses of mothers in ancient Greek and Roman religions. Back then times were tough for women and mothers; birth was dangerous life was dependent of fathers, husbands, and brothers. The Christian church picked up this honouring of mothers and fecundity with Mothering Sunday held each year in the northern spring, during Lent.

But **the modern 'Mother's Day'** that we have built into the tradition we as a society celebrate, began in 1870 in the USA. It began with the protest of a woman called Julia Howe. She was a pacifist and was protesting against the carnage of the Civil War. She believed women had a responsibility to help shape their societies at a political level and to be the conscience of their communities in demanding an end to war and violence at home and overseas.

Our modern Mothers' Day was, in its origins, not a day for sentimentality; breakfast in bed and cosmetics and pampering.

- No, it was a rallying call to women to say 'no' to war and violence
- It was a rallying cry to women to take up their responsibilities of active participation in shaping nationhood, and
- It was a rallying cry demanding a more compassionate society, and an attitude of compassion toward people different from ourselves,
- It was a call to people of the world work for a better way than war for resolving differences.
- It was a call to women to engage in changing the ways of the world.

Julia Ward Howe was a Christian woman calling other women to work for nothing less than peace and non-violence.

Lydia was a God worshiper when Paul meets her... one who gathered with others outside the city walls - because the religious tolerance of her day did not stretch to including God worshipers. She was not a Christian as we know it. She was however a successful business woman dealing in luxury purple cloth, a woman with her own household. She was an influential woman, she appears to be a leader amongst a group

of women and she appears to have a network of contacts amongst the wealthy that she supplies with her rich purple cloth.

How interesting it is that the lectionary this morning offers the story of Paul and Lydia to us for consideration. Lydia although a woman of influence and of religious faith was able to be open hearted and minded to listen to Paul, a Jew from beyond her experience. And Paul was also outside his cultural comfort zone amongst a group of women. He takes up the challenge of the Macedonian man in his vision and shares with the group of women his message of God through Christ. Lydia was obviously persuaded by what he said and was baptised, her whole household with her. Then it was her turn to be persuasive, and she prevailed on Paul and his travelling companions, Silas and Timothy the Greek, to stay in her home. Her hospitality continues even after Paul upsets this business community and spends a spell in prison!

It is a good thing that before Paul left on his travels he had had the vision we heard of last week that set him to thinking about how to behave toward things that are different and outside his standard cultural protocols! If he hadn't, he would have to learn the hard way as Jesus did, about including women from other cultures as equals in the love of God.

Remember the Syro-Phonecian woman whom Jesus wanted to excluded and disregard but who challenged him with the crumbs and dogs under the table image and caused Jesus to mend his ways!

Paul was able to step across the cultural boundaries between genders as well as the boundaries between Jews and gentiles, and between members of the new Christian Church that was emerging, and those who were not - and preach the love of God, forgiveness of sins and the promise of life for everyone, no gender distinctions or cultural preferences.

So here is Paul, forbidden according to his dream to preach amongst his own people, far from the culture that gave rise to Jesus and the community of Christian followers, here he is in the strange culture of Europe. And what for me seems even stranger, he is dependent on the hospitality and network of contacts of a *business woman!*

*We are told Paul is proclaiming his faith amongst gentiles for the first time, and, it is amongst a group of women!*

As with last week prejudices are being challenged and boundaries are being crossed – both theirs and ours as hearers 2000 years later!

The story is full of boundary crossing:

- Jew – Gentile,
- male - female,
- householder – itinerant,
- male preacher – business woman,
- them and us!

Challenges each of them

Each of them saying something to us today about the boundaries that we set up for who and what we will accept as worth attending to, and who we will accept as worth listening to.

As a woman, I want to tell you that it is **still** difficult in our day and age, here in Aotearoa-New Zealand even, never mind in other parts of the world, to feel fully accepted and respected and listened to as an equal within the institutions of our social system.

There are many subtle ways to discount ‘the other’ to have your ‘place’ are underlined.

Think how difficult it was for *Helen Clark* to be taken seriously at first – she had no children, she didn’t fit the stereo-type, or the ‘beauty’ model

- Or Hilary Rodham- Clinton....*Mrs Clinton*... named in the media with her marriage status and husbands' name.
- Think of the pay disparity for women in the work place and how hard it is for women to reach places of influence and authority....
- Women's bodies are still sexualised and used to sell products from fast racing cars to alcohol, from overseas holidays to lottery tickets.
- And our homes are the most dangerous place for women – more murders and abuses take place in the home by men, known to women, than in any stranger danger category.

Jesus calls us to love one another, to respect one another to care for each other's wellbeing. The call of the women is to get on with this! If we take time to love one another, to mend our ways and learn to live on the earth with gentle respect, then we will know the peace of heart that is God's gift to us.

Women, can we dare to rise to the challenge of Mother's Day, to gather your courage and demand respect and an end to violence at home and war abroad?

Men, you can dare to be gentle, to stand firm for what is right, to listen to your fears and respond with love to those who are different?

As with Paul and Lydia, Timothy and Silas and the women who gathered at the gate it will be *we, us together*, women and men, who will make this world a better place, a place without fear where the love and peace of God abounds.