

The Colour Purple

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at FBC on May 25th, 2025 – Acts 16:6-15)

Do you remember the film from 1985 called 'The Colour Purple', based on the novel by Alice Walker? It was about an African American woman who has experienced incest, domestic violence, racism and sexism and how in the end, she is able to rise above it all.

I always wondered why it was called 'The Colour Purple'. The film begins and ends in a field of purple flowers. One of the characters says that she thinks it angers God if you walk by the colour purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. This says something about appreciating beauty, in the midst of pain.

Purple is the colour of royalty. In our story today we have a woman who deals in purple cloth.

Lydia only appears in the book of Acts and is one of the few women named in that book, indeed in the whole New Testament, causing us to sit up and take notice.

So, who is Lydia? We are told she deals in purple cloth. She is living in Philippi where Paul has landed, but she is not from there. In fact, she is from a city that is well known for making purple dye and cloth. We know she is probably fairly wealthy, because we learn she runs a household and is a business woman. The business she is involved in, dealing in purple cloth, indicates that she trades in a very expensive product and her customers would have been very wealthy or even royalty. Purple dye was very difficult and expensive to make, so any cloth dyed purple was bound to be expensive and therefore the only people who could afford to buy it were the wealthy.

Purple dye was made from a gland of the snails, that lived in particular seashells, found on the Mediterranean. It took many of these creatures (thousands) to make just 1g of dye. The snails had to be extracted from the shell and then the gland removed from the snail. Can you imagine how time consuming and potentially smelly and dirty that work would have been, hence the cost of purple cloth.

We also know Lydia was foreigner, not having come from Philippi (modern day Macedonia) and her name indicates the region from which she came in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Philippi back then was a Roman colony.

We learn she is a worshipper of God, most probably having converted to Judaism. She is with the other women down by the river praying when she encounters Paul. So clearly, she has an openness to the things of God and has faith.

After listening to Paul, her heart is opened to the message of Jesus that he shares with them and she responds immediately, and is baptised, handy that they were already at the river. More than that, she gets her whole household baptised – family, servants, all who lived in her house, which I am guessing was pretty big and had a number of people living there.

But there is more, she humbly goes to Paul and says if they think she is really a woman of faith, then they are welcome to come and stay at her home, which they do, and she looks after them there.

Later in the chapter we find that after Paul and Silas leave the prison they go straight to her house once more. From this many conclude that the church in Philippi began in her house and others say she was the first Christian convert in Europe.

Lydia, like Tabitha, whom we met a couple of weeks ago, is a woman of faith whom we should emulate, here is why.

Notice what Lydia does once she opens her heart to God. She gets baptised, her household with her, announcing to the world and the Roman authorities that she was aligning herself with this little band of 'followers of the way'.

Converting to Christianity was dangerous and risky. Not only would the Roman authorities not have looked kindly on this, but also her customers, most of them were likely to be wealthy Romans or Jews. In converting to Christianity, she risked her livelihood.

Once baptised she acts, she offers hospitality to this little group of evangelists. And can you imagine the potential scandal of a wealthy woman inviting a number of foreign young men to stay at her home? Imagine the gossip!

She used her skills, connections and wealth to make a difference in sharing the good news of Jesus. It is through her that the church in Philippi is established and begins to flourish.

She was open, open to hearing what an itinerant preacher might have to say about God, and she responded to the message Paul was sharing and acted, first by being baptised and secondly by offering hospitality. Practicing her faith meant generosity and hospitality.

Hospitality is a practical outworking of faith – feeding the hungry, welcoming strangers, serving and praying for the vulnerable is how we follow Christ. Our local neighbourhoods have many in need of shelter, in need of a safe and welcoming space, in need of nourishment (both physical and spiritual) and friendship. Lydia shows us how to go about this.

She opened her heart and her home to God. As we face a new year in our church's life may we do the same, may we have her openness and courage. Amen.