

There are times when it seems that despite all our best efforts, time and planning nothing seems to have happened. We work on the garden, planting up, seeding a lawn, battling against weeds and waging war against the mount-jacks but our inner picture of a garden full of colour and healthy plants just doesn't materialise. Or we might spend a great deal of time and effort on a work project but it isn't having the results we had hoped for and it's really tempting just to give up. I've had many moments like this in my professional life.

And then sometimes, as the saying goes, the flood gates open and everything changes and without warning all that hard work pays off, but maybe not quite as one might have imagined it. As a metaphor of the life of the Church, faith and hope, the opening of the flood gates is a powerful one – and one which in the life of the Church of England at present we definitely need to hang on to.

There has never been a time when all has been well in the Church but there have been times when it has been healthier and flourished more than at other times. If you want to depress yourself about the state of the Church of England then read recent issues of *The Church Times*. Bishop Stephen, our bishop of Ely, as you may know, has been sent to sort out the Diocese of Lincoln. Whereas in medieval times the diocese had been one of the wealthiest in the country, demographically it is now one of the poorest. It simply cannot sustain having a large full time paid clergy and it is more than likely that parish churches may have to close, some become festival churches open for special occasions, and some will have to merge with other parishes. The same issues face the Church throughout the country; there is a real threat to our ancient parish system to have a working church in every community. Add to this the effects of covid, the aggressive attacks of humanists and secularists who want all religion removed from public institutions, then we can see that the Church is facing a very uncertain and fragile future.

But sometimes we need difficult situations like this to rethink what we are doing and the way we are doing it. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, for example, many churches were in a terrible physical condition, vicars were more interested in mixing with gentry, whilst the growth of new industrial towns destroyed old traditions and the place of the church in peoples' lives.

As a result, inspired men such as John Wesley and John Newman launched new forms of Christianity through Methodism and the high church Oxford Movement, opening the flood gates to an amazing Christian revival in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and growth of new church communities.

History teaches us that although everything changes, it also repeats itself. After the initial excitement of Pentecost and fervour of the early Church, St Paul and his friends were finding it very hard to get people to accept the gospel. But Paul and his companions persisted, despite being beaten up, thrown into jail and mocked.

And then everything changed – the flood gates opened, their faith and hard work paid off and the Gospel spread like wild-fire throughout Greece and Asia Minor. What triggered this is narrated rather mysteriously in Acts of the Apostles. In a dream Paul saw a ‘man from Macedonia’ who directed him go to Troas, Samothrace, Neapolis and then to Philippi where he would meet Lydia. Who is this man? Some suggest it was Luke, the author of Acts of the Apostles and one of Paul’s travelling companions; some suggest it might have been Philip of Macedonia, the brother of Alexander the Great, whilst others think it might just have been his own inner voice personified.

Whatever the case, Paul now met with considerable success. The story about Lydia tells us a great deal about how the Gospel was received. First, we have a tendency to think of early Christianity spreading largely amongst the poor. But Lydia is well-to-do. She runs her own business selling purple dyed material. Purple was created using a dye from the very expensive Murex shellfish, so only upper class Romans and Greeks could afford it. The second but much more interesting detail, is that she is running a religious refuge or home only for women. When Paul arrives preaching that through baptism ‘there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3:28) she asks to be baptised along with her whole community. This is groundbreaking stuff; there were no women-only synagogues, so here the church has created a radically new type of community. The flood gates have opened and Paul went on to found many new church communities

So, perhaps we can now see why a very minor detail in the story of the paralysed man at Bethzatha in John’s Gospel is of symbolic significance. The man has spent years by the pool at Bethzatha hoping someone might help him in to benefit from the waters’ healing powers, especially when at certain times of the day the waters were stirred up when the sluice flood gates were

opened. But his disability meant others had got to bathe in the waters before him. It was not until he met Jesus that he was stirred up in a very different way. His transformation was not just physical; later he became sufficiently confident to take on Pharisees.

So, what is our take-home message from the story of Lydia and the man at Bethzatha? Both stories I think illustrate to us that despite the considerable challenges to the Church in England at the moment, we have to continue to work in faith, be open to new possibilities and find new and creative ways of being church in the community. Who knows, perhaps the flood gates will open, and the church will undergo a transformation, just as it has done many times in the past.

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