

Archbishop Smith: The Heart of Lydia

My thoughts are inspired by a line from Sacred Scripture, given for the mass of the day today (Monday of the Sixth Week of Easter). Acts 16: 11-15 recounts the journey of St. Paul and companions to Philippi and an encounter that occurred between him and Lydia during his first days there. We are told that “the Lord opened [Lydia’s] heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.” A simple sentence, but there is a lot happening here.



First of all, consider Lydia herself. She encountered Paul when he went to a place of prayer and spoke to women gathered there. Lydia, described as a “worshipper of God,” was among them. She listened “eagerly” to “what was said by Paul.” Well, we know what Paul was about. He spoke of nothing except the Gospel, and the Gospel in its fullness. In other words, he would have been speaking about all that God had revealed to the world in his Son, Jesus Christ, and the fulfillment in Christ’s death and resurrection of God’s saving plan for the world. He would have made clear also that the Gospel message calls the hearer to respond to it by faith and repentance. To all of this, Lydia listened “eagerly.” Now, that kind of eager response has not always been universally

shared. Quite the opposite. The call to conform our lives fully to Christ and to accept in obedience and trust the truth of his revelation is not infrequently met with rejection. Yet, Lydia, listened “eagerly” and, moreover, asked that she and her entire household be baptized. The key point to see here is that her heart had been “opened” by the Lord. This is a grace for all of us to seek, and constantly. Christians live by the Word of God. Whenever we encounter hard sayings and react with resistance, Lydia reminds us to seek from God the grace of an open heart, one that receives eagerly all that God says to us, especially those words that call us to repentance, to a renewing of our minds (cf. *Romans* 12:2).

The context of this narrative teaches us that acceptance of the Word of God has significant consequences not only for our personal lives but also for the life of the world. Paul had gone to Philippi at the prompting of the Holy Spirit. By his preaching the Word there and its acceptance by Lydia and her household, the Gospel put down roots in Europe for the first time. It was the beginning of a wondrous history that over the ensuing centuries transformed a continent and eventually the world. Neither Paul nor Lydia could have foreseen all of that. God, however, did. I am reminded of the teaching of St. John Paul II, who often said that, “in the designs of Providence, there are no mere coincidences.” The meeting of Paul and Lydia may have been experienced as a chance encounter. Not so. It was part of the mysterious unfolding of God’s plan for both Lydia and the world.

So, Lydia’s heart becomes enormously instructive for us. Let’s pray that the same grace that opened her heart to receive eagerly the message of the Gospel will be at work in ours. That Word will surely transform our lives. It will just as certainly have an impact upon the world around us, even though, like both Paul and Lydia, we shall not likely see how that will eventually play out.



Orthodox baptistery at site where Lydia is said to have been baptized.