



A Tale of Two Women: Reflections on Acts 16: 11–22 during June 2020

[A message from World Federation President Alison Judd]

I felt challenged in a conversation I had with a friend this morning. I was being critical of those I had seen on last night's news queuing to get into a (newly re-opened) Primark store and seeming so desperate they forgot all about social distancing. My friend commented (gently) that many people with growing children have been desperate to buy affordable clothes during this time of lockdown while cheaper clothes stores with no online ordering facility and charity shops are closed. I hadn't thought of that!

The events of this month have drawn our attention to divisions in society, around race, gender, poverty and privilege, restrictions and responsibilities, power and oppression. Today is the third anniversary of the murder of Jo Cox (MP) who called for a divided UK nation to focus on what we have in common.

During the missionary journey of Paul and Silas, Timothy and Luke, they meet two women with very different backgrounds who have their lives turned around by the gospel message. Lydia – wealthy, respected and influential; the un-named slave girl - abused, manipulated, disruptive and with a mental health disorder.

Paul is used by God to empower both women. Lydia's mind is opened to Paul's message and she (already a worshipper of God) becomes a follower of Christ and is baptised. She opens her home to the mission team and this probably becomes the basis for the church in Philippi.

The slave girl's mental health issues have made her vulnerable to abuse and manipulation. She is completely controlled by her 'masters'. Her healing liberates her as they are no longer able to make money from her. She is now free but completely alone. We are not told what happened to her.

Let's imagine that she is taken in by Lydia – the hospitable Lydia – whose new faith may also have opened her eyes to the needs of this young woman. She offers her a safe space in her own home, food, fresh clothes, training in house-keeping and sewing the purple cloth available to the dealer.

How does this imaginary scene relate to us as we celebrate 25 years on from the Beijing declaration that opened our eyes to the need for women's empowerment and gender justice?

Do we identify with Lydia, in the privileged position of being able to support young and vulnerable women; provide a place of safety, education, skills and leadership training; a means of supporting themselves and their families? Or encouraging women to realise the abusive practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) needs to be replaced with other forms of 'coming of age' ceremony? Do we help protect vulnerable young girls by raising awareness of predatory sex-traffickers?

Perhaps we identify with the slave girl, looking back over our lives that were dysfunctional, manipulated, used and abused until we met Christ and discovered brothers and sisters we could trust and who would encourage us to step out in faith and live victoriously with Jesus in our hearts.

And as Lydia and the slave girl (in our imagination) may have become co-workers in the new church plant in Philippi, equal in the sight of God and both with potential for bearing fruit in the Kingdom – so we are equal followers of our risen Lord – empowered by the Holy Spirit to offer the gospel of liberation and hope to those around us.

A note of caution. The actions of Paul and his mission band brought them into conflict with the people. The slave owners were understandably furious that their source of income had gone. They accused Paul and Silas of being trouble-makers. They dragged them into the public square, brought them before the Roman officials. They even turned the crowd against them so much that they were eventually whipped and thrown into jail.

So much for empowerment!

There have been times when campaigns for gender equality, social and racial justice have met with resistance. There have been, and will continue to be, set-backs on the way to empowerment and hurdles, barriers and restrictions on the way to liberation and equality.

Are we prepared, like Paul and Silas, to continue in hope because we trust in a faithful God who desires the best for everyone – fullness of life for all? (John 10:10)

Even in prison in Philippi, the apostles prayed and sang hymns of praise to God. So may we.

Early in the COVID 19 pandemic, I invited Federation women to help create a global psalm of praise, completing a sentence beginning 'Holy God we praise you because...' I was uplifted and encouraged by the response and share it with you now.

A Global Psalm of Praise

Holy God, we praise you. You created everything that brings us joy and delight.

Your steadfast love never fails, even when the storms of life rage around us.

You show us your loving kindness.

You instruct us, and give us strength to serve in your name.

Your word heals in every age and community.

We praise you because you give life and you are on the side of all life.

God, we cannot stop praising you for you are God: The one who is magnified and lifted up.

Praise is forever on our lips, because of what you have done, are doing and will do.

You, O God, are active in every time and place.

God's life blessings even reach to us and give us hope for the future.

We cannot contain our hallelujahs! All the time God is good; therefore we trust in God.

In every situation we may trust in God for God is the God of all seasons.

Holy God you have promised that you will never leave us or forsake us.

We will never forget who you are and whose we are.

We will continually praise you, knowing that we can cast all our anxieties upon you because you care for us.

In you we find a refuge.

The most high will be our dwelling place and our protection.

No harm will befall us or overtake us.

We worship the Holy God who is all-knowing and all-seeing;

the God who holds us and guides us lovingly.

The Lord God holds us in love and his protection is like a fortress around our lives.

God is worthy of Praise and Thanksgiving

For God bestows upon us amazing grace.

You have engraved us in the palm of your hand.

**We are overwhelmed by your love and nothing can stop our praise;
for your nature and your name is love.**

Holy God, you graciously forgive our wrongdoing.

You are our healer, forever present in our lives.

You are with us in every moment

**Surrounding us with the wonders of creation;
it is too wonderful and we have not the imagination to know why some of it exists.**

You go ahead of us, guiding, leading, watching and holding us in love.

**You are our Heavenly Father who knows us with all our faults
and yet you persist in loving us.**

You hold us in your hand and caress us with your love, despite our flaws.

You are keeping us safe in the midst of the Covid -19 pandemic.

You know each one of us by name.

Holy God, we praise you because you sent Jesus to show us how to live.

Holy God, we praise you because you are always watching over us.

You are our sustainer and our fortress, our all in all

You are a Miracle-Working God

And worthy to be praised

Holy God, we praise you because you are our redeemer

You died for us

You are the Waymaker, and the good Shepherd

Your mercy endures forever

We thank you, God, for Your mercies are forever sure

IN THE MIGHTY NAME OF JESUS.

AMEN