

GUIDE ME LORD? Acts 16:1-15

I learned a valuable lesson about guidance early in my Christian walk. I'd been a Christian for a couple of years and was really keen to serve the Lord. We lived in a little village about 8 kms from the main town centre, and I was forever prevailing upon my parents to drive me into Kiama to church and youth group activities.

When I turned 17 - they gave me an old car for my birthday. Yay! Freedom for both the parents and the teenager!

To help pay for the running costs, my parents encouraged me to accept an offer I'd had to play keyboard in a pub band. They figured I'd be safe as the other group members were older and would keep an eye on me, and playing at gigs of Friday and Saturday nights would not interfere with my schoolwork.

Great plan in theory. The trouble was, I hated it. The pubs were always smoky and gloomy, and I was rather bored. There were great long stretches between sets. I didn't drink, being underage, and there was never anyone there I knew to chat with.

I prayed for guidance. "Lord is this really what I should be doing?" I listened. No answer. However, I'd recently read the story of Gideon in the Old Testament, who had used a fleece left outside in the weather to determine God's will. If the weather was wet overnight yet the fleece was dry in the morning - then God had spoken. So I said, "Lord, If you want me to quit the band, please make it rain tonight." It rained and I was thrilled to bits. I had God's blessing to quit the band. Except my parents didn't quite see it that way. "Didn't you see the weather report?" my agnostic father had raged at me when I told them of my decision, and that God had told me to do it. "Rain was predicted!"

It became a very fraught situation, through which I nearly lost my car -but that's another story.

In all the drama that followed, the lesson I learned from our rather wise youth leader was that Gideon did not have the Holy Spirit, and we do, so we don't need to ask for signs to determine God's will.

Looking at our Acts reading today, let's look at how Paul experienced God's guidance.

The first way Paul was guided was through an inner conviction.

Paul's idea was to go to the Roman province of Asia, (not to be confused with what we think of today as Asia). (screen?) Paul had decided that this place was the next step in the strategy to reach the Gentile world with the Gospel.

Luke tells us that Paul and his companions were “forbidden” by the Holy Spirit to go there. The Greek word translated "forbidden" is from the Greek word "to hinder," - the tense of the verb indicating that it was before Paul entered Asia, that this happened. There may have been circumstances that contributed to the decision - we're not told either way - but certainly the Spirit guided Paul's mind, feelings, and reactions to confirm the decision that it was not God's will to enter Asia - before he ever got there - so it was off the agenda.

When we are living in the Spirit, God uses our intellectual and emotional intelligence as well as our circumstances, to communicate the rightness or wrongness of a particular course of action.

Sometimes we overlook this aspect of guidance, and wait for some sort of bolt from heaven, or extenuating circumstance which slams a door in our face and prevents us from doing something. The fact is, that as Christians, our minds and emotions, as well as our lives, are in God's hands, and he uses who we are - our knowledge, our intelligence, our gifts and convictions - to guide us in our service of him.

One commentator has said this: *“When our purpose and long-range goals are clear, we can dare to trust our consecrated thinking and responses of our emotions. The Spirit trusts us more than we trust Him at times.”* We can be encouraged by that.

A second way Paul was guided was while guided while he was in motion.

Paul knew that he would be guided by God. When he was unable to go to Asia, he simply continued moving on to new cities in Galatia following his driving call to preach Christ to the Gentiles. He didn't sit on the Asian border waiting for a voice from heaven. He just kept going.

When he and his friends approached the border of Mysia, they wanted to go northeast into the wilderness area of Bithynia. Again, we read that the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. In this case the Greek verb we translate *“did not allow”* indicates that this guidance happened while they were on the move. The previous guidance was given to the team prior to their getting to Asia, where this time, guidance was given as they were attempting to enter Bithynia.

Again, it is not spelled out how Paul received this message from the Holy Spirit, but the sense we get is that 'a door closed'. Something very definite let him know that this was not what Jesus wanted.

If we are looking for guidance on a particular issue, we need to pray, perhaps consult with other Christians we respect, then take the course of action that seems best. It's as we move forward in faith, that God can direct us. In Isaiah 30:21 we read, "And when you turn to the right or turn to the left, you will hear a voice behind you saying, 'This is the way - walk in it.'" There's also a secular saying that comes to mind which I've always found helpful: **"You cannot steer a parked car!"**

A third way Paul was guided was through a dream. Yes, they do happen.

Paul and his team then did what clear thinking suggested was best: they headed east to Troas on the Aegean coast.

In Troas Paul had a dream. In his dream, a Macedonian man appeared with an urgent plea, "*Come over to Macedonia and help us*" ([Act 16:9](#)). When Paul woke up, he knew the last months had been for a purpose. The "no" of the Spirit now led to a "yes" of clear direction.

v10 says, "When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them."

The Greek word which is translated '*being convinced*' comes from the root which literally means, "to come together, to coalesce, bind or knit together, to see the way things agree, pointing a direction." The use of this particular word suggests that Paul's dream was more of a confirmation of a growing conviction, rather than a single bolt from heaven, as it were. Things 'came together' for him following his dream, and he realised where they should go.

A fourth way God guided Paul was as he 'went with the flow.'

Now on a mission, in more than one sense, Paul and his companions got on a boat and 'set a straight course' to Samothrace. There's a sense in which the 'straight course' is descriptive spiritually as well.

Boats back then sailed or were rowed. This would have been a sail boat. We can imagine Paul and his companions sensing the wind not only filling the ship's sails physically, but the wind of the spirit filling the sails of their mission. There's great power in a full sail!

Jay and I have sailing kayaks. They're 16' long and have a very tall single sail. There are also outriggers either side of the kayak so they don't tip. It's a slightly different technique to sailing a yacht, but the principle is the same. As you turn the kayak into the wind, the sail starts to flap. As you continue to turn, and the little boom swings around, the sail fills with wind, and the kayak takes off like a rocket! It's exhilarating! Such speed.

I see in this passage that once Paul and his companions had the Holy Spirit in their sails, they shot forward!

Once in Macedonia, they went to Philippi - a leading Macedonian city. The fact that Paul went outside the gate and down to the river to a 'place of prayer' indicates that there was not a synagogue in Philippi. However, there was a group of women gathered there. As Paul & his friends shared Jesus with them, the Lord opened Lydia's heart, and she and her household became Christians. Lydia went on to become a quite a force in the early church. Had Paul not been obedient to the Spirit's leading, this would have been a missed opportunity!

Another outcome from Paul's obedience at this time was that they met a physician whose name was Luke - who joined the team in Troas. We know this because the pronouns in the Acts account change from 'they' to 'we' as Luke takes up the narrative. Had Paul not been in tune to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we may never have met Luke, or had his account of Paul's missionary journeys in the book of Acts, nor his Gospel account.

Sometimes, the leading of God can seem frustrating. We think we are on the right track, but then something happens, or we start to have misgivings, and we find ourselves going in a completely different direction.

Paul's experiences are encouraging. While there may be a 'no' from the Holy Spirit, they lead us towards God's 'yes!' We also learn from Paul that guidance from the Holy Spirit is never static. It rarely falls in our lap fully formed. It requires engagement and interaction from us.

In summary:

- * It's as we stay 'tuned in' and are willing to respond,
- * it's as we keep moving forward in faith, and
- * it's as we get on board with what God is doing - letting the wind of the Spirit fill our sails

- that God's guidance becomes ever clearer, and he works powerfully through his people.

May our prayer be today - "God guide me as an individual, and guide us as a church" - and let's allow the Holy Spirit to fill our sails and move us forward in his will.

Let's pray.