

9th May 2010

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Acts 16.9-15 ; John14.23-29

Text : During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, « Come over to Macedonia and help us » (Acts 16.9)

We may not have had many visions recently, but there is no denying the fact that over recent weeks we have been entertained by a whole succession of visions, usually men but none of them from Macedonia, appearing on our TV screens and begging us to come over to their side and help them to win the election. For me, I confess, this produced an inordinate longing for the dawning of May 6th when the process would come to an end and we could listen to something other than party politics. Sadly the inconclusive result has thrusts upon us a further unwelcome period of negotiation but that should not blind us to our Christian duty to pray for our leaders in the unenviable tasks ahead of them and at the same time to support with our prayers all those who have been charged with the responsibility of representing us in the House of Commons. Not being much of a political animal myself, I nevertheless thank God for all those who are willing to take these burdens upon themselves, and it is right that we honour them.

Now at the end of a week of decision-making we round things off by celebrating another important decision, as Shufan stands before us to declare her decision to follow Christ in baptism and to seal it by the laying on of hands in confirmation. We shall listen with particular interest and sympathy to the vows she makes and we will welcome her warmly as she identifies herself as a follower of Jesus the crucified and risen Son of God. For her this is a momentous decision, the more so as she comes from a non-christian culture, and this has been for her a significant and life-changing step. She has been helped by this congregation but it is not just this congregation that she joins, but the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ to which she will now belong. We rejoice to welcome her on this day to be remembered.

Choices can change nations and they can also change lives, sometimes for the better, sometimes, it has to be admitted, for the worse. If I may be permitted to strike a personal note, this past week I too have been recollecting a life-changing decision that I had to make some thirty years ago. And on May 1st I re-lived the event that took place on that day in 1980 when I was consecrated in Westminster Abbey by Archbishop Runcie to succeed him as the Bishop of St Albans. Also, a momentous and life-changing occasion but for me the result of an agonising decision that I was called upon to make. There was no vision involved, no man of Macedonia,

no urgent call for help. Instead it was merely a letter signed by Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister asking me if I would agree to her presenting my name to The Queen to be the new occupant of the See of St Albans. It took me long days and nights of indecision before I could take the step of saying Yes. I think by nature I have a preference for the twilight rather than the limelight, and the courage to decide was hard to come by.

So choices and decisions are in the air – from the relatively anonymous ones like voting in an election to the deep commitment to embrace a new faith or to take up a new challenge. The biblical link-up is St Paul's vision of the man of Macedonia and his call to come over to help his people with the message of the Gospel of Jesus. A heart-felt plea that required a courageous decision.

The older ones among you will remember that this sixth Sunday of Easter used to be called Rogation Sunday, or Asking Sunday, and it is followed by three Rogation Days when among other things we are encouraged to ask for God's blessing on the crops which we have painstakingly sowed in the spring. But today's reading from Acts is a healthy reminder that asking is not a one-way exercise. Yes we ask of God for the things we need, but He also asks of us – and decisions are needed. The politician asking for votes, the evangelist asking for our response of faith, the call from the vicar, employer, bishop or prime minister to undertake some act of service or ministry, all require an answer, and decisions demand courage. It is not impossible that someone in church today is facing some such decision right now. Are we willing to move our job, to take up a new challenge, to respond to a request, to knock on a few doors in support of Christian Aid Week? More particularly, will we listen to the voice of the Lord asking something of us that maybe we would prefer not to do? It is Asking Sunday, and God may be asking something of us.

If so, our response needs to be surrounded by prayer, maybe this week by three days of prayer, our own Rogationtide, praying for the wisdom to know God's will and the courage to decide. And then comes Thursday, Ascension Day, the day when we and the whole Church look upwards to our Ascended Lord from whom comes the courage to say Yes in answer to His call. I like the way in which the writer of the Acts rounds off this Macedonian vision. No words are spoken, no extended prayer is offered. He merely says, « After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us... » Beautifully direct and definite in its obedience. We may ask for a little longer to make up our mind, but when God calls us, there is only one reply we can possibly give. « O Lamb of God, I come, I come. »

