

The Purple Tent

I guess the idea for this Eucharist/reflection/sermon/poem came from Anita Diamant's novel The Red Tent (1997) which imaginatively attempts to construct the story of Dinah from the very slim Hebrew Bible accounts and tries to imagine ourselves into what her world may have looked like. Historical critical method it is not! The Purple Tent attempts to use the poetic, literary genre to imagine what the world of the New Testament Character of Lydia may have looked like. It is pure fiction! But we do know that Lydia was a business woman who traded purple cloth, became a disciple and opened her home to Paul and Silas.

The tent on the edge of the marketplace
was teeming with people
older folk and mothers
young children craning their necks
trying to see what all the fuss was about
most coming to look rather than buy
but every so often
the crowd parted
and a dignitary strolled in
royal families
and Roman senators
often flanked by a few of the Roman guard
the crowds soon dissipated
not wanting to be the cause of any unwanted attention
and the focus of the bustle
moved on to the next market stall.

Inside the purple tent Lydia smiled
and asked after her customer's health
when invited, she paid the usual complements
to their families and to their tailor's skill
before drawing their attention to the reason for their visit
and commentating on the quality
of the dying and weaving
of the fabrics displayed before her
all crafted patiently and skilfully by hand
rich violets and moody indigos,
cheerful purples and sombre mauves
delicate lilac and soft lavender
deep aubergine and luscious plum
And Lydia gracefully offers her distinguished customers
the exquisite hues and textures of fabrics
to examine, to touch and admire.

And Lydia once again shares with her audience
the story of how the dyes are made
the human effort and struggle
that cumulates in the creation of such beautiful colours
for this is part of the experience and enjoyment
of the visit to the purple tent
not a task for the coarseness of slaves or servants
who might snag the delicate materials with callused hands

not a task even for the tailor who might mark up the price to high
but a pleasure for the refined to enjoy
the transaction the mere necessity at the end
and Lydia, knowing the nuances of her business
begins the tale of the crashing of the sea
the Mediterranean sun refracting light
off the waves lapping the beach
and the joyful shouts of children as the boats return.

But Lydia's story is the edited version
honed to add to the romanticism and illusion
the seeming virtue of buying expensive fabrics
and keeping her business a success
the real story begins in the darkness of the deep
with the sand and the salt
the pounding of the waves during storms
or the heat of the sun reflecting off the jagged rocks
rising the temperature of the water
the real story is the story of the life and death
twelve thousand tiny fish, twelve thousand tiny lives
sacrificed to make just one and a half grams
of highly prized purple dye, worth its weight in gold
countless shellfish inhabiting the coastal waters
bound to the lunar rhythms of the tides
and the ebb and flow of the turning seasons.

Lydia's untold story rambles on
turning now from the creatures of the sea
to the families whose livelihood
depends on trawling the sea bed
the bleeding hands hauling the nets
the breathlessness of the diver hunting
for the breeding grounds of the murex fish
the danger of the unpredictable ocean currents
the sheer backbreaking work sorting shellfish into baskets
the lifting and carrying
the squeezing out of the white juice from the veins
and laying the liquid out to heat up in the baking sun
the collecting and drying of the precious purple juice
the stink of decaying fruits de la mer
not to mention the spinning, weaving and dyeing
and the risks of running such an exclusive business.

Lydia has made her sale,
profit enough to keep many dozens of families in work
and herself in a comfortable fashion
as befits the head of a beautiful household
the purple tent has closed for the day
and Lydia saunters through the evening glow of sun-baked streets
enjoying the kites dancing in the sky above her
calling at the market stalls now closing for the night
picking up delicacies with which to delight her guests

ready to open her home and entertain Paul and Silas
and her new-found friends in the faith
still not quite believing that they accepted her
a dominant, confident, headstrong woman
who knew her place as a successful business woman
for whom knowing God, like the liquid that changed colour in the sun
had brought colour and depth to her life.

As Lydia makes her way through the courtyard
in the cool breeze of the evening
she gives her last instructions
to the kitchen busy preparing food for her guests
Lydia freshens up after her working day
ready to greet Paul and Silas
and her new found family of faith
the table is luxuriously set
the food prepared to perfection
and as the sun sinks beyond the horizon
the low murmur of voices can be heard
savouring delicacies previously un-tasted
and Lydia is both excited and content
not quite believing that these people of faith
should deign to visit her household
and delight with her in finding faith in Christ.

As the supper ends, a hush descends in the courtyard
the dishes cleared, the servants take their seats at table
spread before them are a simple loaf and a goblet of wine
together they share the story of Christ's last meal
of the struggle in the garden, of his trial and crucifixion
the sky turning dark and the purple curtain in the temple ripping in two
of the coolness of the garden tomb
and a body wrapped in simple white linen cloth
they tell the story of the women at the breaking of the dawn
of wonder and amazement and the rising of life itself
of the flooding of their lives with colour and adventure and hope
and so they take the bread and give thanks,
break it and share it and recall Christ's words
so they take wine and pass it around the table
remembering Christ's promise of new relationship with one another.

[Share bread and wine]

And so the lavish meal ended with simple everyday fare
bread broken and wine poured
with the singing of hymns and the saying of prayers
with love and laughter shared between friends
interweaving the stories of their lives
with the great story of faith
and as the last guest left
Lydia stopped to reflect on the flying emotions
of her new found faith and the family of believers

she had broken free of the never ending demands
of running a business purely for the profit at the end of the day
and found something of much greater worth
than the inky dyes and her expensive purple cloth
Lydia had learned to look beyond the here and now
and dream of the possibilities unfolding before her
of journeying into the future with Christ.

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