

## 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 compliments  
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 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.

© Clare McBeath and Tim Presswood, 2007