



**\* The bible passage is embedded in this talk, however it might take place before the sermon, so you can remove it from your version of the talk based on the Order of Service.**

**\* It would also be helpful to show the Christian Aid Week film before your talk.**

# Christian Aid Week 2025

Good morning! I'm \_\_\_\_ and I'm part of the Christian Aid Ireland team. It is such a pleasure to be here to worship God together this morning. I am so grateful for the opportunity to share with you about the work of Christian Aid and to thank you for your ongoing support through Christian Aid Week and beyond.

I'm excited to be able to share with you today about how communities in rural areas of Guatemala are experiencing freedom from malnutrition and poverty thanks to the support of our partner, Congcoop (pronounced: con-he-cup), and the joyful determination of women like Amelia and Aurelia, who you've just seen in the film.

The agroecology project which Amelia and Aurelia are part of is delivered by our partner, Congcoop, who we've been working with since 2011. Agroecology, put simply, is farming in a sustainable way that works with, not against nature. The project has been designed to support communities to return to Indigenous farming practices and adopt agroecological approaches that conserve their land, culture and livelihood – adapting to suit the specific environmental conditions of an area.

Wherever the Apostle Paul travelled, knew the importance of understanding the places he visited and the importance of establishing deep-rooted partnerships with the local people he trained to be leaders in these communities.

Throughout his missionary journeys in Acts, we see how he gets to know a place and its people – where they meet, who has influence and what challenges they are facing - as he follows the leading of the Holy Spirit wherever it takes him.



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In Acts 16 v 11-15, Paul and his travelling companions (including Luke, who is now writing in the first-person), arrive in Philippi, a Roman controlled city in Northern Greece. There they meet with a woman called Lydia. Even though her story is so briefly told in Acts, the impact of Lydia's conversion to Christianity is incredibly significant because it ripples through her family, her household and then out into the wider community – and it changes the trajectory of Philippi forever.

Just like Lydia, Amelia and Aurelia are leaders who are using their influence to bring about significant change for those in their community. In their case it is by sharing their newfound knowledge of Agroecology.

Lydia was a significant woman in Philippi. Luke calls Lydia 'a dealer in purple cloth' and a worshipper of God. She would have been held in high esteem by the people who knew her, and her gender was most likely not an issue when it came to the influence that she held.

Amelia is a hardworking and resourceful 24 year old who loves her family and loves to play football; she is an excellent goal keeper for her local team. Aurelia is an inspirational leader and lynchpin of her multi-generational family. Both women are passionate about farming their land – using it as a means to feed their families and also as a source of income. They grow a range of crops, such as bananas, peppers and casavas, so that they can protect their loved ones from malnutrition and ill-health; selling the rest at weekly markets.

Their dedication and hard work did not go unnoticed by their communities, so when Congcoop asked for leaders to be identified for their agroecology training project, Amelia and Aurelia were the obvious choices. Their communities were confident that the women could be trusted to share all of their learning with them, ensuring that everyone could participate in the adaption of farming practices which will guard against the effects of the worsening climate crisis.

So Lydia, Amelia and Aurelia, are all perfectly positioned to be change-makers. They are determined, faithful and motivated to see the lives of the people around them improved however they possibly can. And that determination enabled them to free themselves from the limitations and constraints imposed on them by their societies.

Let's go back to Acts and consider where Paul first comes into contact with Lydia. How did he know to go the side of the river outside the city gates to find a fellowship of believers?



Well, we look at chapters 13, 14 and 17 of Acts, we can see that Paul's missionary strategy was to go to the local synagogue whenever he first arrived in a new city. However, there was no synagogue in Philippi – a detail that suggests fewer than ten Jewish men lived there, as this was a requirement for a synagogue to be established. Which is why Paul decides to go to the river because he knew he would find a place of informal worship there. Streams of moving water was a traditional place for displaced Jews to gather – think 'by the rivers of Babylon'. And it's on the banks of the river that he finds 'a place of prayer' attended, it seems, exclusively by women.

This detail reveals a lot about both the character of the city and God's unexpected plans. In a city dominated by Roman power and pagan worship, the first seeds of European Christianity would take root, not in grand buildings or among political leaders, but by a riverside among women. And, just like in Lydia's day, God is still working in unexpected ways and in unexpected places. Not always in grand buildings or through powerful people, but in the small acts of love and generosity of ordinary Christians in Ireland, Guatemala and elsewhere around the world who are seeking to faithfully follow Jesus and share God's love with those in need.

In Amelia's village, the river's edge has changed dramatically in recent years due to climate change and the impact of huge sugar cane monoculture plantations diverting the course of the river for their own use. In her childhood, the river flowed deep and wide, filled with fish and other kinds of beautiful Guatemalan wildlife - now it is practically unrecognisable.

The loss of the river has imposed severe limitations on the lives of the communities that relied on it. And so, as with the absence of a synagogue in Philippi, we might assume her village lacks any potential for change. But just as Paul seeks out even the smallest group of faithful people, so our partners at Congcoop know that there is hope in even the most difficult of circumstances.

By joining Congcoop, Amelia's gaining the skills and knowledge to cultivate native seeds that are better suited to the changing climate and limited water supply. She's planning planting schedules that will deliver multiple harvests throughout the year; making her own organic fertilizer; and constructing rainwater collection systems. And, like Lydia, whatever she learns, she shares with others, confidently training other women to adapt their farming practices too.



A lack of Jewish men in Philippi meant a synagogue couldn't be established – this feels like an insurmountable limitation to the growth of a faith community in such a patriarchal society. The same could be said for Indigenous communities in Guatemala. The need to travel for stable employment means that sons, fathers, husbands frequently work and live miles from their home villages. This means that the flow of knowledge from woman to woman is invaluable, as many women are culturally or logistically unable to travel to attend Congcoop training. Thanks to the support Amelia and Aurelia have from their husband and family respectively, they are empowered to attend the training programmes. They then cascade their knowledge outwards so that every member of their community has access to this specialized approach to farming that blends ancient and modern knowledge. Where there is a desire for new life, there is no limitation or barrier great enough to prevent God from breaking through.

Thanks to Paul's desire to seek out faithful people in Philippi, Lydia's home became a place where social barriers crumbled as business owners and slaves, Jews and Gentiles, men and women gathered to break bread and share their new faith. Lydia's story offers profound encouragement for us all. Her conversion reminds us that God's family transcends social, ethnic and gender barriers. Her immediate offer of hospitality demonstrates how faith naturally flows into action. And the use of her home as a place of gathering reminds us that God often works through ordinary people in everyday settings to accomplish extraordinary purposes.

Lydia's story reminds us that God often works in unexpected ways through unexpected people. The Philippian faith community, born by a riverside and nurtured in a businesswoman's home, would grow into a vibrant centre of faith, partnering with Paul in his ministry and standing firm through danger. Amelia and Aurelia's stories remind us that even the most proactive, determined and ambitious among us, need help to move from survival to a thriving life. These women are facing multiple threats to their families' survival on a daily basis. But both are defiantly staring down these threats; remaining strong, resourceful and good-humoured.

I want to invite you to partner with Christian Aid and Congcoop so that we can ensure that other Indigenous families, who are bearing the full force of the climate crisis, that they have done nothing to cause. Your support this Christian Aid Week will help more farmers like Aurelia and Amelia to build their resilience to extreme weather events and bring about transformational change in their lives, because the story of Lydia shows us that true transformation begins not in centers of power but in opened hearts by quiet riversides.

Let's pray.



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