

The commemoration of these three devout women follows directly on the observance of three of Paul's male co-workers in the Lord. It is a reminder that though the first century was a patriarchal time from which we have very few women's voices, the apostles and indeed the whole early church depended on women for sustenance, protection, and support. Lydia was Paul's first European convert. She was a Gentile woman in Philippi who, like many others, was attracted to Judaism. As what the Jewish community called a "God-fearer" she was undoubtedly accorded respect by the Jewish community, but still would have been marginalized. Paul encountered her on a riverbank where she and a group of women had gathered for Sabbath prayers. Undoubtedly Paul preached to them and Lydia "opened her heart" and, together with the whole household of which she was head, was baptized. Lydia was a prosperous cloth-merchant and a person of means. She was able to lodge Paul, Timothy, and their companions in her house, which Paul used as a local base of operations (Acts 16:11-40). Phoebe was the apparent patroness of the Christian community in Cenchreae near Corinth. She is the first person mentioned in the long list of Paul's beloved associates in Chapter 16 of Romans. Paul refers to her as a "sister," as a "deacon," and as a "patroness" or "helper" of many. In other words, Paul includes her as part of his family in Christ and infers that she has housed and provided legal cover for the local church. Paul's use of the word "deacon" should be regarded with caution, since the diaconate as an order had not yet developed in the Church, but it does suggest the kind of ministry out of which the notion of ordained deacons developed. It would not be too much to call her a "proto-deacon." January 27

58 Dorcas (Tabitha in Aramaic) was a revered disciple in Joppa who devoted herself to "good works and acts of charity." When she fell ill and died, the community sent for Peter, who came and, after prayer, revived her (Acts 9:36-42). Though we have no record of the words of these three women, the apostolic testimony to their faith and their importance to the mission of the early church speaks for itself.

Collect Filled with your Holy Spirit, gracious God, your earliest disciples served you with the gifts each had been given: Lydia in business and stewardship, Dorcas in a life of charity and Phoebe as a deacon who served many. Inspire us today to build up your Church with our gifts in hospitality, charity and bold witness to the Gospel of Christ; who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Lessons

Malachi 3:16–18

Then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the Lord and thought on his name. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them. Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

Psalm 100

1 Be joyful in the Lord, all you lands; *
serve the Lord with gladness and come before his presence with a song.

2 Know this: The Lord himself is God; *
he himself has made us, and we are his; we are his people and the sheep
of his pasture.

13 Enter his gates with thanksgiving; go into his courts with praise; *
give thanks to him and call upon his Name.

4 For the Lord is good; his mercy is everlasting; *
and his faithfulness endures from age to age.

Luke 8:1–3

Jesus went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them[a] out of their resources.