

Littlebourne URC 3pm 12/02/2023 – D C Wagstaff – Acts 9:32-42

In our reading today we heard of Peter's travels, first to visit the saints or faithful believers in Christ who were in Lydda, a town about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem, not far from Ben Gurion Airport. Nowadays it's known as Lod and in 2019 had a population of about 77k. According to Wikipedia it was a prominent centre for Jewish scholarship and trade, from the 5th century BC.

While there, Peter found a man whose name was Aeneas. He was a paralytic and had been bedridden for 8 years. We don't know whether Peter knew of Aeneas before his visit, or became aware of him after meeting with the saints there. However, by whatever means, God enabled these 2 men to meet. It would seem Peter knew *why* he had found Aeneas. The account of this meeting is very short but we are told Peter addressed him and said "*Jesus Christ* heals you. Get up and tidy up your mat."

We read that Aeneas *immediately* got up... and that the local people on seeing him turned to the Lord. Wow, they weren't expecting that... and the consequence of this surprising event was a mass turning to the Lord by people living in the city, and also the Plain of Sharon which stretches northward between the mountains and the Mediterranean Sea towards Caesarea. Peter did not take any of the glory for himself, he had quite clearly said "*Jesus Christ* heals you." Like us, Peter had the delegated authority of the Lord, to speak and act in *His name*. Not to speak or act on his own whim but at the prompting of Jesus Christ himself and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Peter may have been reminded of the time recorded in John 5 when Jesus was at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem, near the Sheep Gate. One man lying there had been an invalid for 38 years. After asking the man if he wanted to be well, Jesus had said to him; "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

Next in our reading we are told about Tabitha, she was a disciple in Joppa, modern day Jaffa - a Mediterranean port city. Tabitha was always doing good and helping the poor. About this time she became sick and died. Her body had been washed in preparation for burial and she had been laid in an upstairs room. In the hot climate of Israel a burial would have taken place swiftly, perhaps even on the same day.

Joppa is quite near to Lydda where Peter was visiting, about 10-12 miles further northwest. The disciples there heard that Peter was in Lydda and sent 2 men to urge him to come at once. Peter went with them and on arrival was taken to the room where Tabitha's body lay.

All the local widows were gathered there, crying and showing Peter garments that Tabitha had made. It would seem that Tabitha's life had been one of service toward the community around her and they were grieving her passing. They had memories of her kindnesses that were very dear to them. Tabitha was a Christian and her service for others was an expression too of her love for God. Perhaps you remember Jesus' words when telling the parable of the sheep and the goats... "Then the righteous will answer the King, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Matthew 25:37-40. Our lives and our actions can testify to others of our love for the Lord, even to those who do not believe in Him, because they see and can observe that we are very different in our attitude and motives.

In verse 40 we read: "Peter sent them all out from the room; then got down on his knees and prayed." Peter needed to quietly seek the Lord for his instructions before acting.

Remember, this is Peter, who when he was with Jesus was often the impetuous one. In Luke 9 on the Mount of Transfiguration with John and James, he had spoken to Jesus of putting up 3 shelters, not knowing what he was saying as a cloud enveloped them. Then a voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." Following the Lord's Supper, after Judas' departure, Jesus had told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' (Zechariah 13:7). Peter had responded, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." Jesus replied to him, "this very night, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times." But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." Later that evening, as Jesus was being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter had lashed out irrationally with a sword... cutting off the right ear of Malchus, a servant of the high priest (John 18).

Jesus' arrest was a time of change for Peter... he follows at a distance and sits in the courtyard of Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. When a servant girl came to him saying, "You also were with Jesus of Galilee" he denied it before them all. He said "I don't know what you're talking about." Then at the gateway another girl saw him and said to the people there, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." Again he denied it, this time with an oath: "I don't know the man!" After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." At this, Peter began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" Immediately a cock crowed, and Peter remembered Jesus' words: "Before the cock crows, you will disown me three times." And Peter went outside... and he wept bitterly. (Matthew 26:69-75). I believe this was a "wake up" call which brought Peter to repentance for his three denials and caused him to reflect on all that Jesus had said to him.

In John 21 we read of the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after rising from the dead. Peter together with several others had spent the night fishing but they'd caught nothing. Early in the morning Jesus called to them from the shore, telling them to throw their net to the right side of the boat and when they did so they caught 153 large fish. What a lesson in obedience! Shortly after this Jesus asked Peter three times whether he loved him and Peter replied, "you know that I love you." Each time Jesus instructed him to feed and to take care of his sheep.

In the first chapter of Acts, Peter stood up amongst the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and led them in appointing someone to replace Judas. Then, in Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, when they had been filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter stood up with the Eleven and addressed the crowd which had come together in bewilderment. He explained what had just happened as being the fulfilment of the words of the prophet Joel (2:28-32). When the crowd asked how they should respond to his message, Peter went on to lead them to repentance and about three thousand were added to their number.

In Joppa, having prayerfully sought for guidance, Peter turned toward the dead woman and said "Tabitha, get up." We are told she opened her eyes... and seeing Peter in the room, sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers and the widows to come that they might see she was alive! They witnessed this, it became known all over Joppa with the result that many people believed in the Lord.

Peter had in many respects seen his example when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter - was this the pattern for him to follow now? Jesus himself had been confronted by a commotion; people crying and wailing loudly. In Mark 5 Jesus put them all out from the house, then taking the girl's father and mother along with the disciples who were with him he went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and spoke to her; "Little girl, I say to you, get up!" Jairus was there to see what would happen - he needed to know, after all he was not only her father but also a synagogue ruler. It was only right that the girl's mother should also be present, for decency's sake. But I believe Jesus had the disciples there as part of their training and equipping for His service, to watch and learn from him.

We are very blessed as Christians to have the Bible as a book of reference to read and learn from. In the four Gospels we have records of Jesus life, teaching and actions. Then in Acts we read of things that took place in the early Church; how God was now enabling and using the Apostles to do what Jesus himself had done. In John 14:12-13, after Judas had left from the Last Supper, Jesus said to Philip; "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father."

Does this promise still apply today? I believe it does. Our God continues to be at work changing and transforming lives. Jesus said "No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." (John 6:44a). We who have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour can still be used by Him, if we prayerfully submit our will to His and obey the prompting and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

May we become more and more familiar with the message contained in our Bibles; it is life-giving and life-instructing! Let us pray whenever we commence reading, that the Holy Spirit would bring the words to life and write God's message upon our hearts and minds, applying Godly wisdom to our daily lives and in times of need helping us to recall these things.

If in doubt, pray! God still speaks to us through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the words of the Bible. Just recently a Romanian friend was telling of her experiences growing up as a young child in a poor Christian family, how God had provided for their specific needs on one occasion by directing someone unknown to them to deliver exactly what was needed at that time. And on another occasion God had given healing from sickness in response to prayer offered in faith and the anointing of the sick person with oil as directed in James 5:14-16; "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." And may I just add, God can and does use righteous women too!

May we be inspired by the life of Peter, who was just a fisherman when Jesus called him and his brother Andrew saying, "Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men." And at once they left their nets and followed him (Matthew 4:18-20).

May our lives be lived in obedience to our Lord, submitted to His will, bringing honour and glory to His Name as we respond in faith to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Amen.