

ACTS 9:32-43  
AN ADVENTURE IN FAITH

On Thursday the Primary 3 classes from Juniper Green School were in the building, learning about their local church. They had to find answers to lots of questions that I had set for them and then afterwards they had the chance to ask me questions. One child asked me about my job and then she asked “how do you make people believe in God?” I had to say that “I can’t! I tell people the stories of Jesus and then people have to choose whether they believe these stories or not!” Here’s the question: how do people come to faith? How did you come to faith in Jesus, if you have? There are all kinds of ways by which people come to faith: for some people, they never knew a time when they were not Christians, they grew up in life of church, they grew up with faith and then coming to their own sense of faith and profession of faith was a natural next-step and they have kept growing in faith ever since. For some, faith is something new and the way to faith is a gradual progress of listening, reading, asking questions, coming to Church, and at some point along that progress they come to faith, though they may not know exactly when that happened. For some, there is a crisis-event in their lives that awakens a sense of need that they have never known before and they look for something that will meet that need and turn to their Christian friends or to the church for help and find Jesus and faith is born in their hearts all of a sudden. You will come to faith in a way that is different from me and probably from everyone else in the room! This is the wondrous variety of the people of God.

This is also the wondrous variety of the ways in which the Spirit works. It is Spirit at work that persuades us to faith. I didn’t go as far as that with the P3 child on Thursday: but this is the other side of the coin: What is it that persuades you that Christian faith is a good thing? There are so many voices around that tell us that Christian faith is out-of-date, or irrelevant, so there must be something in you that keeps telling you that church is a good thing, otherwise you wouldn’t be here. We might call it our ‘gut instinct’; something that we can’t describe or define, but it tells us that faith is good and that Church is good. The theological answer to that question is all to do with the Spirit of God at work in the world. The Spirit is at work in us; the Spirit persuades us that faith is good; the Spirit leads and guides us to Jesus. Today is Pentecost, the day on which God poured out His spirit on Christians in a dramatic way in Jerusalem; the story is told in Acts 2; it all happened in response to Jesus’ promise, that He would give His disciples His Spirit to help, guide, lead, teach, equip them for faith and mission.

The Spirit works in all kinds of ways. When I tell my friend a story of Jesus and my friend believes that story, the Spirit is at work. When you do something good, kind and loving for someone and they ask you why you do it, and you tell them that Jesus inspires you, the Spirit is at work. When you’re listening to me preach and something strikes your heart and mind and you take that away to believe it and live by it, the Spirit is at work. When your life hits crisis and you search for grace to help you, to give you strength, the Spirit is at work and is still at work when you read something in the bible that strikes a chord for you, or when your friend prays for you, or loves you in some other way, the Spirit is at work. We can’t control the Spirit; He works in ways that are God’s; our task is to have hearts open to the Spirit, to listen and learn and believe and walk in Jesus’ ways.

In Acts 9, we see some other ways in which the Spirit is at work to lead people to faith. Peter is on his travels. He’s travelled to Lydda and Joppa – Joppa is now called Jaffa, a suburb of Tel Aviv. He has gone to these places to preach and to visit the Christians and the churches to encourage them in their faith. When he’s there, two people are in need of his help and the churches ask Peter to intervene, with dramatic results. The impact of both of these events is the same: *“All those...” (Acts 9:35) “This became...”*

(Acts 9:42) People came to faith as a result of these dramatic events. Peter, in partnership with the Spirit of God, is at work in these places. We told these stories earlier, so I'm not going to tell them again, but to reflect a little more on what these events look and like and the impact they have.

The first thing that strikes me about these two stories is how similar they are to stories of Jesus in the gospels. A paralysed man was brought to Jesus by his four friends and they ripped open the roof of the house to get their friend to Jesus. Jairus' daughter was 12 when she died and Jesus brought her back to life again. Here we see Peter healing two people in remarkably similar ways, helping a paralysed man to walk and bringing Dorcas back to life again. Not only are these stories like Jesus, Peter tells us they are performed by the power of Jesus: to Aeneas he says "*Jesus Christ...*" (Acts 9:34) and in the story of Dorcas we simply read that Peter prayed and she is raised by the power that raised Jesus from the dead. At the centre of these two miracles stands the person of Jesus; He is not physically present, but He is certainly there in the person and power of the Spirit. Peter knows that God has done these things.

The glory for all this goes to Jesus. As we said, both of these miracles lead people to faith in Jesus. "*All those...*" (Acts 9:35) "*This became...*" (Acts 9:44) Some of you find these miracle healing stories really hard, mainly because someone you've know, and loved, and prayed for has not been healed. We struggle to understand why God should have healed these people, yet our loved ones have died. The reality of the Bible is that these healing stories are always very much the exception rather than the rule. The church in Joppa had lots of widows as part of that church family: "*all the...*" (Acts 9:39) which tells us that there were lots of men who had died in that church. Peter pointed people to Jesus, so that people believe in Jesus. Peter knew that it was Jesus' power that had done this and these were signs of the salvation that Jesus had worked; so people were led to put their faith and trust in Jesus.

In the towns of Lydda and Joppa people came to faith when they saw these miracles. Some of you say that "if only we had miracles today then things would be different and more people would believe." Well, these things are in God's gift and He has chosen to give miracles most of all at special times in the Bible's story and for lots of other times there are none. That doesn't mean that God has gone away when there are no miracles; God is still at work in quiet ways here and His Spirit is still at work in ways different from these. Go back to my first question: how do we come to faith? How will other people come to faith today? The Spirit is still at work; where do people see Jesus and His power and His grace today, to believe in Him?

Who first told you about Jesus? I know, from the times we've asked this question before that there are all kinds of answers. For some of us, it was a parent telling us Bible stories that awakened the first glimmerings of faith; or a grandparent, or a teacher at school, or a Sunday School leader, or even a minister. We have heard these stories and we have come to believe these stories and believe Jesus about whom these stories speak. This has a quite different feel to it from the answer that comes from the stories of Acts 9, but it is the same Jesus and the same faith and the same salvation! When we answer that question for our faith, then we begin to see what the world still needs. The world still needs people telling Bible stories: tell them to your children, to your grandchildren, to your friends. When I go to take part in school assemblies, it is all about telling stories; the children find these stories intriguing and they are powerful stories; let these stories loose in the world and the Spirit will work through these stories. Some of you are in church here, now, as a result simply of a family member hearing these stories at school. Tell the stories of Jesus and let people discover Jesus; pray for the Spirit to work in people's hearts.

Put yourself in Peter's shoes; how does that feel? "Peter, we've got this paralysed man; can you do something? Peter, have this dead dear woman! Can you do something?" There is an expectation on Peter that he can and will do something about this! How does that feel? Overwhelming, perhaps. I read something the other day that suggested Peter came at this with "bold humility". When I read that at first it sounded like a contradiction in terms – bold humility! But actually it works. Peter stepped up to the challenge, but he did it depending on God; he prayed! What kind of difficult, even seemingly impossible, situations are you facing? What are you doing about them? The great temptation is to leave them, to ignore them and hope that they will go away; that tends not to happen, sadly, and at some stage we have to deal with them. Or we try to meet them in our own strength, to devise a strategy of our own and we sink under the weight of our strategies and then feel that we've failed, we're guilty. Peter prayed: now, I'm not saying that this is all we need to do and that everything will be sorted immediately, but when we pray, God makes something happen; when we pray we humbly depend on God; when we pray we even have the strength to take risks; when we pray, the Spirit is at work in us and the power that raised Jesus is at work in us! Bold humility!

I came across this Justin Welby quote yesterday: "The more Christians pray, the more we become the people of good news for the world around us." Peter's bold humility found its roots in his prayer, depending on Jesus. We depend on Jesus' power for far more than we realise; His power is at work in us because the Spirit lives in us. The key to opening that power is prayer; when we pray we express a sense of depending on Jesus; when we pray we let loose power in us and the Spirit is at work. Welby suggests that this is not just for ourselves, but is also for the mission of the church in our place; we pray and good news comes from us and people see Jesus. "Lord teach us to pray!"

"Preacher, you have said all this about the Spirit, but the Spirit is never mentioned in our passage today!" The Spirit is like good floodlights: when floodlights are good, you often never see them, but they bring out the glory of the building on which they shine. The Spirit is like good floodlights: we don't see Him, He's not always mentioned, but He is always there, pointing us to Jesus. His job is to let us see how good Jesus is, how powerful Jesus is, how great a Saviour Jesus is; it is to Jesus that Spirit gives glory. He leads people to faith; He helps us be bold in our faith and helps us to be humble; the Spirit is at work in our world, leading us to Jesus, helping us to live by faith in Jesus. The challenge for us is to pray, to be the kind of people Jesus wants, to believe and live by faith. The Spirit helps us; glory be to Jesus!