

We are going to continue with our series looking at Spreading the Good News, our series for June and just as a reminder to you in this series we are looking at the early weeks and months of the newborn church – we regard as having been born really at Pentecost when Jesus had returned to his father and the mantle of carrying forward the mission and ministry of God fell to the Apostles and those who were gathered together in the upper room at Pentecost, and so we are looking at these early weeks and months of this newborn church. This week we see the way that the good news about Jesus spread out from Jerusalem into the surrounding cities which contain both Jewish and Gentile (that is non-Jewish) populations. So Jerusalem was essential Jewish and now the gospel carried out by the Apostles and other Believers was going out from Jerusalem into the more diverse Communities outside of Jerusalem where there were more Greek speaking people and people from other cultures. Interestingly at this stage there was still no organised strategy for how to reach non-Jewish people: the message that was being preached was essentially a one from Jewish people and it was designed for Jewish people, and yet non-Jews were responding to the good news of Jesus Christ but this stage church had yet to really work through how do we present the Gospel to those who are not Jewish: And, of course, Paul was key in developing that strategy for reaching non-Jewish people. Peter seems to have had a ministry as Preacher and Pastor over some fast-growing, mainly Jewish, congregations as we're going to read now. So if you want to turn in your bibles to the passage for this morning, it's from Acts 9:32-43:

[Reading Acts 9:32-43]

Amen. So those words – we're going to reflect on them for a few moments this morning. So even at this very early stage in the development of the church I think there are three interesting features of Peter's mission that can be seen in these verses.

Firstly: it was a mission to Body and Soul; a mission to Body and Soul. So Peter wasn't simply preaching to the people that he met, he was responding to their physical and emotional needs. So in that sense it was a holistic message – it was a message responding to the needs of the whole person. Throughout Jesus' ministry he had always met people's emotional and physical needs as well as their spiritual ones, and even though now Jesus had returned to his father the leaders of the early church followed in Jesus' footsteps in this. In fact it was a central part of their praying that God would act in a holistic way, that he would respond to the needs of both body and spirit. In Acts 4:30 the believers were together praying and in their prayer they said this: "Stretch out your hand O Lord to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." The healings that we have in this passage here, this morning, they have strong echoes of the work of Jesus, and of course they would do (wouldn't they) because Peter who performs is the main player in these two incidents we have here. He of course was a personal witness to the ministry of Jesus; so when Peter prayed in verse 34 of our reading here, when he prayed: "Aeneas...Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and tidy up your mat," he was simply imitating Jesus. In Luke 5:24 you may remember that Jesus said to another man who was unable to use his legs: "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." And later when Peter prayed for Tabitha (in verse 40) he "...sent all [the mourners] out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning towards the dead woman, he said 'Tabitha, get up.'" Once again, he was simply doing what he had seen Jesus do (as we could read in Luke 8:54: Jesus did a very similar thing – Peter was simply imitating what he seen Jesus do).

Many of you know that I grew up in the Salvation Army, and so, during my formative years, I had a strong sense that God's work was about reaching the whole person. Many times, I have heard William Booth quoted, saying such things as: "You cannot warm the hearts of people with God's love, if they have an empty stomach and cold feet." In other words, you must respond to people's physical and emotional needs for them to be able to really hear you about their spiritual needs. These days, I try to respond to the holistic, body and soul mission of God through engagement with organizations such as Citizens UK. (Citizens UK is an alliance of local community groups that these days functions across the most of the Boroughs of London and so in Croydon there is Croydon Citizens, which makes up London Citizens, which is a part of Citizens UK.) So, over the last 12 years (in my previous church) amongst other things I've campaign for a Living Wage for cleaners and other low paid staff in large companies; I've been involved in campaigns for Safer Streets, particularly for young people; and I've been involved in a campaign for more truly affordable housing to be built (in the community where I was living at the time). And this has been a way that I have been trying to express my belief that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not simply about giving mental assent to certain beliefs about who Jesus is, the message of Jesus is about shalom, it's about people feeling that there's a sense of well-being that God wants them to have and to know in their own lives. And through organisations like Citizens UK I try to express that sense that this gospel is not simply about what we believe but about how we live together, well. And in actual fact I wanted to just to show you a picture, because I've got these two pictures in my little study here at the house, and two of the most inspiring pictures of my whole ministry are of campaigns that I was involved in through London Citizens. Let me just show you one of those pictures (I'm hoping that it will show up on the screen). So, this picture here is of City Hall, just south of the river; can you see there's people gathered all the way round City Hall (going right the way round), and this was during the launch of a campaign called CitySafe: trying to keep the city safer, creating safe havens for particularly young people (if they were feeling unsafe). And we had an arrangement that the police were using their helicopter to go to the different places where the CitySafe campaign was being set up, and they took this picture from a helicopter of people from London Citizens gathered all the way round City Hall, and I'm somewhere in the middle there with a megaphone trying to get people to connect up around City Hall. And to finish off thinking about London Citizens, in actual fact this very week I formed a WhatsApp of people at our church who are interested in seeing how we can campaign to make changes to our part of Croydon "for the common good" of all residents. So if you're interested in being part of that "Citizens" group at Woodside Baptist church, then do get in contact with me by text or email to say you'd like to be involved, and I'll be glad to add you to the WhatsApp group. But this is all to say that I believe the message of Jesus Christ is not simply something we hear and believe; it's something we live out and it affects behaviour, it affects how we live together, it affects what sort of a society we want to see in this country, because it's a holistic message - a message the connect with the whole person.

The second interesting feature of Peter's mission is that it resulted in new Believers. Because God's salvation addresses every part of a person (as I've already said, it affects body, mind and emotions) there's a connection then between faith and healing in the whole idea of mission. Now this doesn't mean that God will always heal those are unwell (we know that's not the case), but I do believe that, within God's sovereign will, he can and does still bring healing. We don't fully understand when God chooses to heal and when healing is not apparent. But we do believe that whether someone is healed or not that in death as believers we believe that we experience the

complete healing of being in Christ in death, that we are received back into God and in that sense we experience the full total Shalom, of being loved and received into God's presence.

In today's passage, we read that after Peter healed Aeneas (in verse 35) and when he raised Tabitha from the dead (in verse 42), large numbers of people heard about these miracles and many became believers. I think that the way faith is expressed within mission is a key thing that if we are going to be engaged in sharing the good news of Jesus then we want to believe that the message we have is a one that can transform society, it's a message that really matters and can bring transformation. If we are to really have faith in the message that we bring it's important for us to be prepared to be obedient to the Lord even when it costs us dearly; and this reminds me of the story of a man called Telemachus.

We understand from history that he was a rather weedy-looking monk who lived in a monastery in the east of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, and he felt God calling him to go to Rome. He couldn't figure out why God would want him to go to Rome but he felt the pressure to go, and so he made the long, westward journey to Rome. When he arrived there, people were running about that city in great confusion. He had arrived on a day when the gladiators were going to fight in the amphitheatre. Everyone was heading there to watch the excitement. Telemachus thought this must be why God had called him to Rome, so he followed the crowds. As he went into the amphitheatre he found himself amongst 80,000 people who cheered as the gladiators came out into the arena and shouted "Hail Caesar! We die to the glory of Caesar." This little monk, Telemachus, thought to himself, "Here we are, four centuries after Christ lived on this earth, in a supposedly civilized nation, and people are killing one another for the entertainment of the crowd. He thought to himself, "This is not Christian it is barbaric." So Telemachus got up out of his seat, ran down the steps, climbed over the wall and walked out into the centre of the arena, and he stood between two large gladiators who were about to fight, and he put up his hands and he meekly cried out, "In the name of Christ, stop!" The crowd laughed and jeered, and one of the Gladiators slapped Telemachus in the stomach with sword knocking him out the way; but Telemachus got up and again stood between the two gladiators, and repeated "In the name of Christ, stop!" The crowd was getting frustrated because their fun was being stopped by this little monk, and so they started to chant "Run him through! Run him through!" and some of them started to hurl stones at Telemachus. Then one of the Gladiators took his sword and stabbed Telemachus in the stomach. Telemachus fell into the dust and as the sand turned red around him, he weakly cried out one last time, "In the name of Christ, stop!" As he died on the arena floor, the crowd realised what they had done and they grew silent, and within minutes they had emptied out of the amphitheatre. The Emperor at that time was a man called Honorius, and he was so affected by the faith of that little monk that he gave a decree banning the gladiatorial games from then onwards. So history records that, thanks to Saint Telemachus, this was the very last gladiatorial contest in the history of the Roman Empire. Telemachus must have saved thousands of lives, this little monk must have saved thousands of lives by having the faith to go where God was calling him and to do what God was asking of him. Having faith that the mission and the message we have is a one that we can trust and that we must have courage to respond and follow through on.

The third notable aspect of Peter's mission is that it did not confuse "culture" with "gospel"; it didn't confuse culture with gospel. Let me try and explain what I mean by that. Twice in today's passage Peter prioritises the spreading of the good news of Jesus over the Jewish culture that he was most comfortable in. So in verse 41 of our reading Peter touch the hand Tabitha. Now Tabitha had died, but now she had been raised back to life; so it's a bit of a grey area but for a

devout Jewish man first of all to touch a woman that he didn't know – that was taboo – but even worse to touch a woman who had been dead was breaking some massive cultural taboos (within Jewish culture), but for Peter the mission that he was called to, to preach and to live out the message of Jesus Christ, that was paramount. The second example of the way that Peter didn't confuse culture with gospel is that in verse 43, the very ending of our reading (the very last verse), Peter went to stay with a tanner named Simon. Now that doesn't seem particularly radical, but leather workers (as a tanner was – he worked with leather from different animals) and they were despised because they often had to work with pigskin, and of course pigs were regarded as unclean by Jewish people. But once again the mission of spreading the good news about Jesus took priority in Peter's mind over his Jewish culture and Jewish Customs. What about us? Does culture or gospel take priority in our lives?

A few years ago I was listening to a US preacher named Pete Scazzero, and he made this challenging and memorable statement about the Christian life, he said: “Jesus may be in your heart, but Grandpa is in your bones!” Let me just repeat that: “Jesus may be in your heart, but Grandpa is in your bones!” I think what Pete Scazzero was trying to say there is that we may make a sincere commitment to Christ but so often it does not go deep enough to really transform the roots of the culture that has shaped us, and which we received with our mother's milk; from the very earliest days of our life we've received a particular culture, and so often the roots of that go so deep that even our commitment to Christ doesn't necessarily reach and touch those central ways and aspects of our culture, and our way of doing things, and our way of thinking, and our way of behaving and responding. Sometimes they are not affected, even by this central decision that we believe we've made to follow the Lord Jesus. During this period of lockdown and the increased time for personal reflection (which this is provided for me), I've been thinking about this issue, and I've recognised that there are ways that I behave, ways that I respond to particular situations, which I know have been there for many years, but are actually not honouring to God. So I've been asking him to help me to change my patterns of thinking and behaving so that they are more in line with God's will for me. I think this is what Paul is telling each one of us to do in Romans 12:2, he says: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” So I invite you to join me in asking God to another within us those deep roots that so often entangle us and tie us up, and then for us to have the courage to allow him to take us on the road to being transformed in body, and soul, in how we act, how we think, how we pray, how we engage with other people. Because as we are transformed, our lives will then attract others who are looking for answers in their own search for meaning and purpose. And then we will be playing our part in God's holistic mission. Amen.

Let's pray together. Lord God, we thank you that we believe that if we read your word with faith and with an openness to change, that you have promised that your word is living and active, and you want to bring change in our lives. Lord, you never want us to stand still, you never want us to think that we have arrived and that we are now where you want us to be, but rather you want us to recognise that life is a journey – it's a spiritual journey, it's a journey of recognising that we sometimes go down blind alleys, and have to come back out of those and find our way back onto the true path that you want us to be on. Or even sometimes find we've gone down a blind alley and actually, we've got to take route B because actually route A is no longer available to us. But Lord your word tells us that you use all things for our good, and so often it is our mistakes that you can use to teach us, and to show us, the way forward. I pray Lord God that we will learn to respond positively, and more and more so in our lives when you show us that we sometimes go

wrong and go down a cul-de-sac. And that if we will learn humbly from those mistakes, you can help us to grow more like you and for your culture, your transforming power to run deep in our lives, to touch every aspect, even those deepest parts of us; can be touched by your gospel, your transforming message – the power of your Holy Spirit. So Lord God I pray for each one of us now that in these days that still involve lockdown and limited engagement with people outside of our homes that we will know that you are with each of us in our daily lives. We pray that we will trust you, and we will look to you, and that Lord God even through these times of lockdown that we may grow as people together, as well as in our individual lives. In your name we pray all of these things Lord Jesus, Amen