

Resources for Churches...

Responding to the Coronavirus

What Peter Did Next

One of the things that I have kept being reminded of since Pentecost is the need for us to stay with the story - to carry on reading. Pentecost is not the end, the last of the Christian festivals from which we take a break until we begin it all again at Christmas. Pentecost is the beginning. The story in Acts continues straight on from the end of the gospels and in our lives the story should continue too. How should we be living as people who have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit?

When I was young I read the book 'What Katy did'. I can't remember anything about it now, except that I enjoyed it. But I do remember, sometime later, reading the sequel 'What Katy did next'. I had got so interested in the character, I wanted to read the next part of the story. In this case, the sequel was nowhere near so engaging as the original, but we can't say the same about the book of the Acts of the Apostles. We see how familiar characters adapt and grow, we are introduced to new faces, and we find ourselves caught up in all sorts of unpredictable, exciting and challenging events. But most of all we see the amazing things which took place through the ongoing work of God's Spirit in people who were ordinary men and women.

At the end of chapter 2 we read how the Spirit united the believers into a loving, worshipping, generous, joyful community. Chapter 3 begins with the first 'act'.

Read Acts 3:1-10. Read it again slowly, noticing any words and phrases that seem to jump out at you. You might want to imagine yourself in the scene, as one of the people accompanying Peter and John to the temple that day. How do you feel at each stage of the story? Unconcerned? Uncomfortable? Nervous? Compassionate? Bold? Astounded? Overjoyed? Something else? The next time you walked through that gate, what would you remember most?

Interestingly, this first amazing act of the apostles isn't one of Peter and John being anywhere or doing anything particularly remarkable. It was as they were going about their normal routine - going to the temple to pray; as they had done countless times before and would do many more times in the future. They may well have walked past this man many times before. He may even have asked them for money before. But this time was different. Peter engaged with him. He spoke with him intentionally. He responded to what the Holy Spirit inside him was prompting him to say and do.

What do you find most encouraging? Was it that:

- Peter was just an ordinary, working class guy who had made mistakes, misunderstood things, blurted things out in the wrong way many, many times and yet God still used him.
- Peter was just going about his everyday life rather than being on some special hunt for opportunities to witness?
- All that was needed was for Peter to hear and respond when the Holy Spirit just says 'Go on then. Give him some good news'?

Think about your daily routines. When might there be moments when the Holy Spirit says the same thing to you?

v4 Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Nothing remarkable about that, we might think. But yet Peter and John had been disciples who not so long before had not wanted Jesus to waste time bothering about a sick woman (Mark 5:31) or spending time with children (Mark 10:13). And they had a deadline. Prayers began at 3pm. Not the time to get distracted by the pleas of a beggar, we might think. So the first thing to notice is that Peter was now being like Jesus. Jesus always



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had time and always gave people his full attention, not hurrying by like the fictitious priest (Luke 10:31). Peter had changed.

- Have you ever used time pressure as an excuse for not doing something Jesus would have done?
- Have there been other occasions when you have tried to follow Jesus your way and not his?
- What difference might it make if we give people around us our full attention rather than pursuing our own agendas?

v6 'What I do have I give you'. Peter was conscious he couldn't give the man what he asked for - he didn't have any money. But he did know what he could give. At the moment many of us are conscious of what we can't do. There are things we would willingly give and do if we could. But that isn't what God is asking us to do. What matters is to recognise what we do have to give and share that. Ask God to show what you can say and do in order to bring someone good news.

v7 Peter grabbed the man by the hand and pulled him up. There had been countless times when Peter had seen Jesus heal people, telling them to get up and trust him to heal them (e.g. Luke 5:17-26). Here we find Peter giving a helping hand. He didn't lay on hands and pray, he helped the man to stand, trusting that God would provide the healing, strength and power as he did what he could. There are many people around us right now who need a helping hand. They need someone to just happen to walk into their lives and have the courage to reach out. It might be a through a chance encounter. Or it might be someone who is always in the same place when you pass on your daily walk. Someone you recognise but someone you've never stopped to talk to before. Maybe even someone you have overlooked, or subconsciously discriminated against because of their age, gender, colour or (as in this case) disability. If you are housebound, it might be someone giving a knock at the door or a ring of your phone. It all begins with us noticing them and giving them our full attention. What might hold you back from reaching out? How does this story help you to understand how to overcome that?

v8 He jumped to his feet and began to walk. The Acts of the Apostles doesn't start with Peter healing 100 people, 50 people or 10 people. It begins with 1. But what a difference one made! We can't help everyone, but we can all help someone. Then someone else. Think about it. If each of us just reached out to one person a week for the next month, how many people would that mean had been helped by us as a church as a result? It only takes a small amount of yeast to bring about a massive change to a lump of dough. And all the people were filled with wonder (v9-10).

Notice too that what Peter gave the man didn't make him poorer, it made him richer. Peter was encouraged and blessed as well as the man. He grew in his understanding of what having God's Spirit living inside him really meant. He grew in confidence. We don't find Peter hiding behind natural human reticence in the future, but we do find a deepening assurance that God wanted to work through him in the same way he had in the life of Jesus. What have you already seen God doing through you which will encourage you to be more confident in reaching out to others?

All the amazing things that God accomplished through the apostles began with an ordinary person, in the place where he was, doing his regular thing. But what made it all possible was Acts 2. Peter had been filled with the Holy Spirit and was 'tuned in' to the Spirit's prompting - walking in step with the Spirit (Gal 5:25). When Paul writes in Ephesians 5:18 'be filled with the Spirit' he uses the present continuous tense - in other words, having the sense of 'keep on being filled'; being filled as a daily habit, a way of life. Ask yourself whether you are allowing the Holy Spirit to fill you afresh each day so that you too live and act like Jesus and bring his life-changing power to others.

The man never got what he asked for, but God gave him something far better. Here is another instance of God doing immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to his power that is at work within us (Eph 3:20-21). How will this encourage you to pray - for yourself, for us as a church and for our community?

What did the man do next?

What will you do next?

What will we as a church do next?

