

Pentecost 3 – 9am St Aidan’s & 10.30am Wesley – 5th June 2016

Theme: “God breaks into the world in amazing ways”

Readings: Galatians 1:11-24 ‘Paul, a changed man’
Luke 7:11-17 ‘Jesus raises the widow’s son’

Introduction

In our Scriptures for today we have two stories that reveal radical changes in people’s lives for a variety of reasons, as God, through Christ, breaks in.

The Gospel is a follow-on from the healing of the Roman centurion’s servant in the first part of Luke 7 which we looked at last Sunday. This week Jesus has travelled further on from Capernaum to the town of Nain, which is around the Sea of Galilee and to the south west. It is there that he encounters a funeral procession in which there is this widow who has lost her only son, which would mean that she had lost everything as there was no-one left to support her. Jesus is moved with compassion for this woman – ‘his heart went out to her’ we read and he said ‘Don’t cry.’

Jesus touches the coffin and commands the young man to get up. Jesus then gives the young man ‘back to his mother’. In a sense he is also giving this mother ‘life anew’ as she was destined to become destitute with no-one to look out for her. Her world is turned upside down by this miraculous healing from the dead of her son.

Jesus’ act of compassion transformed this woman’s mourning to joy, her desolation to hope. In this act Jesus is exercising God’s special mercy to the least among society. Jesus notices and responds to those at the fringe of society, who are often unseen, and remain unnoticed, but not by God. Here we see God at work through Jesus and this should be seen as a challenge for us not to forget those on the margins of our society today.

Galatians 1:11-24

The Epistle reading from Galatians also speaks of a transformed life – that of Paul. This is a testimony to what God has done in his life – changing him from a fervent Jew who persecuted the early Christians, to one who was transformed by God through the amazing Damascus road experience that caused the man Saul to even change his name to Paul – such was the impact on his life. He becomes the leader and missionary to the Gentiles, in the name of Christ, to those beyond the Jewish faith. Because Paul was not one of the original disciples, nor was he from Jerusalem there were some tensions, some politics occurring in the early church and here Paul lays out his testimony as one who has received ‘revelation from Christ Jesus’ as his guiding light to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. It was three years later that Paul spent time with Peter, the designated leader of the church in Jerusalem, and also with James, the brother of Jesus. We are reminded that we can’t control what God, through Christ, will do. It is amazing how God intrudes on lives, sometimes not even willingly by those around.

William Willamon, writing on this theme in his book, *The Intrusive Word*, shares the following story on how sometimes we take a wrong direction that has positive outcomes for the Gospel.

He writes:

In my last congregation we decided that we needed to grow. We voted to launch a program on evangelism. Evangelism – you know what that means – ‘we had better get

out there and get new members or we'll die' syndrome. ...We studied a program telling us how to get new members and then armed with packets of flyers we went out two by two to visit our assigned areas. Helen and Gladys were given a map and told to go down Summit Drive and turn right and that was their patch to canvass. But Helen and Gladys, both eighty-ish, didn't really hear the directions. They went down Summit Drive but forgot to turn right. Instead they turned left venturing down amongst the housing estate where there were people with lots of problems. They ran the risk of evangelizing the wrong type of people!!

Late in the afternoon each team returned with their reports of their doorknocking and mentioning any people interested. Helen and Gladys reported that only one person had shown any interest in coming to their church. Her name was Verleen who lived with her two children in a small apartment in the housing trust area. Verleen had never been to a church but she thought it might be nice for her. I said to myself, under my breath, that's what happens when you don't follow directions. You end up with the wrong people!!

Well true to her word Verleen turned up at church the following Sunday and was proudly introduced by Helen and Gladys, along with her two feral looking children. All went pretty well and Verleen enjoyed it so much she decided to come to the Thursday morning Bible study I ran. We were talking about temptations we may have experienced and one person mentioned accidentally taking a loaf of bread from a shop that they hadn't paid for and whether to go back and mention this to the storekeeper and pay for it. Then Verleen added to the conversation by commenting on the fact that she had been a cocaine user and her then boyfriend, not the father of her children, wanted her to help him rob a convenience store. She had said 'no' and got beaten up for that. However, Verleen said it felt great to say 'no' even with the consequences. After that all conversation seemed trivial and I must admit I was pleased when the Bible study ended. However, I was even more stunned when helping Helen into her car after the Bible study she said to me, "you know I can't wait to get home and get on the phone and invite people to come to the next Bible study. Your Bible studies used to be dull, but now I think I can get a good crowd for the next one."

You just never know how God may enter in to your life and through whom it may occur!

So often we do not expect God in the unexpected. We do not see God at work in the lives of different people bringing a host of experiences that may well be quite different to our own. No right or wrong but simply different offering a freshness, a newness and a wider breadth to our faith understanding.

Just maybe that could be our challenge for today – to be led down the supposedly wrong street to have the possibility to meet some-one God really wants us to touch with our presence and be touched by their differing experiences.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, in your resurrection you surprised us. You not only defeated death but also returned to us in your resurrected glory. But you did not stop there. You led your people from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria and even unto the ends of the earth, even to our congregation where we worship you this day.

Keep coming among us, resurrected Christ. Keep surprising us and changing our perceptions of faith. Keep transforming our dead ends into your fresh beginnings. Amen.