

### **Sermon: Acts 3:12-19 (using 'The Message')**

'Change your ways! Turn to face God so he can wipe away your sins, and pour out showers of blessing to refresh you'.

(The story behind this week's passage is from the account of the healing of the man at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. Jesus had been crucified, had risen, and had ascended, and the Holy Spirit He had promised had now been poured out on his followers, to empower them for ministry. Peter and John had simply been going up to the Temple at the 3 O'clock hour of prayer. The lame man who used to beg there had been asking them for money and Peter had said 'I don't have any money. But what I do have, I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk!' And the man did. He, who had been unable to walk all his life, got up, walked, jumped, and went into the Temple with the disciples, dancing and praising God.

And a great crowd had seen it, and now were thinking that there must be something amazing about Peter and John. But Peter said No! It's not by any power or godliness of ours that this man has walked. It's simply by faith in the name of Jesus. So you all now need to repent — or 'turn to face God' - and allow God to forgive you and pour out showers of blessing on you'.)

A few weeks ago, I answered the door to a delivery driver — as many of us were doing quite a bit during the lockdown. Normally, I'd just say a friendly 'hello' and 'thank you' — but on this occasion, something in the man's face made me pause, and I asked him how he was doing. He said he wasn't doing very well. His wife had been anxious and sleepless for some time, and so he hadn't been sleeping either — and they were both at their wits' end. I sensed his desperation and sadness. After a little more conversation (I actually offered him some aromatherapy drops which I'd found helpful, and which he accepted) I said 'Would you like me to pray for you? For your wife?' After a moment's hesitation, he said 'Yes'. There, standing on the doorstep, socially distanced, I said a simple prayer for the man and his wife, asking God to help them, and in particular to give them a good night's sleep. Then he went on his way, and I carried on praying - that day and during the night as well!

A few days later, I received a lovely card from them both— telling me that they'd both slept, and were feeling much better. I was obviously delighted (and relieved!). But during the night, when I'd been praying, I'd begun to sense that God actually wanted much more for the man's wife than simply sleep. I guessed that, probably, God wanted to draw her into a relationship with Himself. (That, I think, is very often God's bigger plan for people for whom he does something wonderful for). I wondered what to do — and a few days later I happened to see the delivery driver again. I told him what I'd been sensing, and I offered him the 'Try Praying' booklet (to help him continue to pray) and also my phone number, so that, if his wife wanted, she could contact me herself so that we could have a conversation. (I don't normally offer men I don't know my phone number — but on this occasion it really did seem the right thing to do.) Shortly afterwards, the man's wife contacted me, and we spoke. It turned out that, as a young person, she'd actually had a relationship with God — but, as an adult, she'd lost hold of it. I told her that I thought God didn't want to let go of her. (Just as Jesus said: 'I don't lose anyone whom the Father has given me'.) I said that I thought God was drawing her back to Himself. I could tell that she understood, and I offered to pray with her. She accepted, and we prayed. Then I arranged to give her the 'Alpha course' book, 'Questions of Life' — which sets out the basics of the Christian faith — so that she could continue to learn. I and some of my friends continued to pray for this lady, and about 2 weeks later I saw the delivery driver again. I asked him how his wife was doing, and he said: 'She's completely different'. The change in her had made a huge difference to them both, and to their relationship. I have to admit, we both had tears in our eyes as he told me this. But I was also nearly jumping up and down for joy as I walked away! I'm continuing to pray for them, and I wonder what God will do.

But this little story of mine perhaps has resonances with the Acts reading we've heard today.

We're in such difficult times at the moment. The pandemic has left a train of problems for people: anxiety, loneliness, illness, bereavement... And all this is on top of all the losses and sadnesses we've always had to live with. Many people, like the man at the Beautiful Gate, or my delivery driver, are desperate. They're at their wits' end, and they don't know where to turn.

What are we, as God's people, to do?

Two weeks ago, we celebrated Easter — with all its joy and triumph. Yet I sometimes think these weeks after Easter can be difficult. Despite our reason to celebrate, life, with its many challenges, goes on. But as Christians, we must never forget that the first Easter was followed by Pentecost — the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all believers, precisely so that they could always have the presence of Jesus with them, and have the power to tell others about Him, and do the things that He did. For us, the followers of Jesus now, the Holy Spirit has come - so that we, too, can tell others about Jesus, and do the things He did — so that, all over the world, others can come to know the living God, and have the joy of being in relationship with Him. There is no greater blessing than this.

And so, in these difficult times, as we meet, and pray for, those who are struggling all around us, we need to remember that we have a message of good news to share, in words and deeds. Sometimes we'll need to say the kind word; sometimes we'll need to do the thoughtful or costly deed; sometimes we'll need offer to pray for someone, and speak words of life and healing (just as Peter did). But as we do these things, we need to keep pointing people to the One who has so much more to offer them than we do.

It is the greatest blessing there is to know oneself in relationship with God, through turning back to Him, having our sins forgiven, and finding meaning and purpose through allowing Jesus to be the Lord of our lives. But, in my experience, it's also a wonderful blessing (second only to that of knowing ourselves in relationship with God) to be able to share in God's work, by telling others about Jesus and helping them to come to know God for themselves.

May God fill us again with His Holy Spirit today, so that, turning to face Him, and having our sins forgiven, we can receive all the blessings He has for us — joy and peace for ourselves, and the power to tell others about Him too.