

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Easter 3 (26 April)

Acts 2:36-41

I am not sure how many babies I have baptised over the forty-plus years of being involved with the Church of England? Quite a few, I am guessing; probably in the hundreds, maybe even one thousand-plus? Who can tell? One reality for sure is that, once baptised, the vast majority have probably never been seen again! But that does not matter – what matters is that they were baptised, and for all the valid reasons of the day.

As I approach retirement, and the stream of potential candidates will cease, it would be quite good fun to find out just what happened to all of those people. Where are they now? In life? In love? In work? In their faith? How has their baptism, so essential to their life at a particular point in time, impacted upon the very person they have become? As most would have been infants at the time (that being the Anglican model, unlike in the time of Peter in Acts), where have those relatively innocent lives progressed to? High-flying executive? Glamorous model? Hard-working entrepreneur? Low-life criminal? Are they well? Are they happy? Are they even alive? The workings of faith's practices have no predictable outcome, save one: that to be counted as one of God's people grants amazing promise; promise which each has the ability, if they so choose, to invoke and embrace.

One thing I could never claim to have done in my ministry is baptise three thousand in one day! Doing one or two is time-consuming enough, three thousand would need serious levels of stamina and an awful lot of water. Quite how Peter managed that lot all in one go, we will never know; even with the eleven companions joining in, that's still some impressive statistic (250 each, if you're interested!). The author of Acts may well have been using 'artistic licence' here, we have no way of knowing. A large crowd, perhaps? A lot of people, maybe. We are all prone to exaggerate when trying to emphasise a point. But, even so, what it does draw to our attention is the success of the moment, the impact of Peter's teaching, and the wonderful inevitability of its outcome. Here were people curious to gather around Peter and his friends, listen to his teaching, be touched by its impact, and open to its consequences. Here were people who had perhaps witnessed the crucifixion, been around to hear the gossip, perhaps even encountered Jesus before His arrest. Here were people open to the inviting power of God.

If baptism does nothing else, it does that. No, it is not an insurance against ill-fortune; no, it does not get you into your first-choice primary school; no, it does not 'open doors' in society as it once perhaps did – but, yes, it does offer a key to encountering first-hand the Living God. One of the biggest sadness's of the Anglican system of baptising infants is that they will never remember it. A few months old, or whatever, and there is no chance that little brain is going to file the experience away for future recall. Parents, godparents, and quite possibly grandparents may well regale with anecdotal stories of what happened on the day, there might be a photo or two, there may even be a certificate at the back of a drawer – but there is no memory. Speak to any adult baptism candidate, and they will instantly

remember theirs, more often because its profound impact was sought, and the sensation of God's intervention experienced in full.

So, what happened to the three thousand? A threat to the authorities of the day? A sign of Peter's impressive ministry? A key to future hope? We have no knowledge, beyond that which we have inherited. We could not – and would not – be here if we had not been led by someone else to that font where our spiritual lives began. When my parents took me to the village church some six weeks or so after I was born, I doubt if they had any idea what seed might be sown by that action. As I retire, possibly back to that same church, that font's continuing presence will quite likely complete a circle whose bizarre journey began some sixty-plus years ago. Who knows!

Peter emphasises that promise is a key component in the action of baptism. Promise offering hope. Promise providing assuredness. Promise being a trigger-point. Promise that says, "God is never far away" in the seed planted by the ritual. Life will never be as it was – 'the baby you carry out of this church, away from this font, is not the same baby you brought in,' I always say to families. The baby will be transformed by the intervention of God into its life, the essence of faith planted, and the spiritual opportunities opened. We may not get very many baptism enquiries anymore here at St. Mark's as modern society moves away from considering it necessary or desirable, but when we do, let us know that the God who was present at Peter's side inspiring those three thousand, is the same God who rides triumphant through the lives of so many more. In these times of uncertainty, such reassurance is valuable to all our lives.

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