

## Bennochy church 10th January 2016

It is frustrating when you don't get your monies worth! *"For what I have paid that doesn't look a lot". "Could you top up the coffee a bit more"*. This little cameo from the book of Acts is about 'half measures'. The apostles Peter and John meet people in Samaria, who we are told, have been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus but, had not yet received the Holy Spirit. In the bible, this is a very unusual situation for people to find themselves in.

In the life of the church, these were times of great anxiety and violence. Persecution was the name of the game and in its midst, stood a man named Saul. To you and me, better known as the future apostle Paul. We are told he tries to destroy the church. Going from house to house, dragging out the believers, men and women and throwing them into jail. The religious authorities, acting a bit like secret police, were trying to get rid of the *'people of the way'*, a description for those who followed, in their eyes, the traitor and blasphemer, Jesus of Nazareth.

As a result of this persecution, the Jerusalem church, with the exception of the apostles themselves, is scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. But, we are told they continue to preach the message of God. Acts chapter eight tells you about one such person, in the stories of Phillip the evangelist.

The irony of the situation is this. It seems, that as a direct result of the persecution, the word of God spreads in a way it might not have otherwise done so. And it is why Peter and John have travelled to Samaria. Stories had reached their ears in Jerusalem, that despite of the persecution, God was doing great things amongst the Samaritans, a people hated by the Jews. Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan. The man least expected to help, did so. There is a sharp intake of breath. Jesus listeners shocked, because he was a Samaritan. That is where this story takes place.

This was like the moderator of the General Assembly coming to visit your church! Peter and John. One of these guys had walked on water! They were part of Jesus close knit team who had witnessed his miracles, heard his parables, seen the empty tomb and in an upper room had seen the risen Christ. These were no ordinary visitors. They were there to see what God was doing.

We need to read into the text a bit here. One of the great experiences of the apostles was Pentecost. The gift of the Spirit of God to his early followers. Maybe it was out of that experience, that Peter and John realised, that in spite of what God was doing here and these people having been baptised, they had not yet received that same gift of the spirit. Something was missing.

But they were also there to bless the work of God. In case any conservative elements in Jerusalem are opposed to the gospel coming to the gentiles, what better way to counter that opposition, than two of the greatest apostles travelling to Samaria, a land and people despised by the Jews, and saying this is the work of God. A blessing imparted by the laying on of their hands and the baptised receive the spirit of God.

Up to this point, for these people, half measures had been given. It might have been the case they did not know what they were missing. These are early days for the church. Things are moving apace. In the confusion of their situation, not everything would have been known. Things were still being worked out. Experiences are being shared about what is meant to be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth.

They must have been both fearful and exciting times. Those early days of people learning about the spirit of God. Mistakes were made. Look at the example given of Simon, who got it all wrong. He tried to buy this 'magic' power! He is told in no uncertain terms, you cannot buy the Spirit of God! So it was a learning process for the early church.

I get the impression, that one of the reasons for the visit by Peter and John was the early church, centred in Jerusalem, is cautious of new ideas, especially, if they were not their new ideas. Has anything really changed in the life of the church? It is almost as if they are chasing the Spirit. Catching up with what

God is doing in their neighbourhood, ahead of them. The Spirit of God cannot be controlled. It goes where it wishes. I suspect, we too will always be playing catch up with the spirit of God. Do we recognise the work of God in our neighbourhood? Can I suggest that God is at work, and often, the church is not even involved! We try to contain God, but he is far bigger than the church!

The spirit blows where it wishes. What we need to do is grasp the opportunity and see the privilege of joining God where he is already at work. Not restricting God by our understanding of church, but releasing ourselves to follow Christ and to see and join in, with the ongoing work of God. That is the essence of the story of Luke 10, where Jesus sends out the 72. He says, go ahead, see what is happening, get involved; for there is the Kingdom of God.

From Jerusalem, Peter and John travelled to see what God was up to, and met the reality of God in the gift of his Spirit to the Samaritan people. Will we take the risk to leave the comfort of what is known to us, and set out on the pilgrim journey, to travel where God already is, and be part of the work, of the Spirit of God. Amen.