

Strangers and Angels

Last week I told you that Peter's first sermon had spectacular results. Well, today we see just how well his message was received, because we read '*So those who welcomed his message were baptised and that day about three thousand persons were added to their number.*' Three thousand! What was it that made Peter such a powerful messenger? I suggest two things. Firstly he was preaching from first-hand **experience**, his experience of the **resurrection**, when his eyes were truly opened to the truth of who Jesus was and what his mission was all about. His message was **authentic**. Secondly, he was no longer acting **in his own power**. Remember that he and the other disciples have just received an **outpouring of the Holy Spirit** the Spirit who will enable them to be witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. So Peter is a messenger who speaks from his own experience and in the power of the spirit.

And as Andrew writes '**Just this week in this very Church we had such a messenger. Just as our service on Thursday ended, Don appeared at the back of the Church there, an American with a camera. He was disappointed to have missed the service, but he took his photos and then accepted our invitation to some Dunbar hospitality and he joined us for coffee. He joined us for coffee and a whole lot more. He looked a bit like I imagine St Peter might have looked, big bushy beard, quite a chunky kind of guy, he was from California and he'd driven food-delivery trucks for a living until Jesus turned his life around. Don had his eyes opened when he finally gave his life over to that higher power he was overjoyed to name as God and finally he'd been delivered from a forty-two year addiction to alcohol that had cost him everything.**

Those who were there with me will agree that Don, our guest, definitely became our host. At the service we'd had another Acts passage about the apostles preaching the Gospel fearlessly, with boldness and we'd prayed in the intercessions that God would show us how to do that in our own lives, in this place. And in walked Don. The planned Bible study on the Acts of the Apostles was put aside. The Acts of the Apostles had arrived in our midst. And yes, he was very American in his directness and his warmth, a great, lovely bear of a man. But his stories of his experiences of helping other people to have their eyes opened, just as his had been, had an absolute ring of truth.

A guys' guy with a message. A "We have seen the Messiah" kind of a message, a message that gets right to the heart of your messy life and questions you deeply, loves you absolutely and then tries to lead you into the light. In all his stories of being that kind of messenger for others time and again he found in people that the roots of addiction lay in the deep pain of unforgiveness and unhealed family wounds. Speaking to those people as a man who'd lost everything, breaking open the bread of his own experience and sharing it, people could see that this was and is a message you could trust.'

We **could** have waved goodbye to him after he had taken his photos. If so, we would never have heard his amazing story. We **might** have just dismissed him as a passing tourist. If so we would

missed a special encounter. **Thankfully** we invited him to sit at the table with us have coffee and share not bread but chocolate digestives.

I must admit when first introduced to Don I felt a wee bit uneasy. After all I'm a Brit and he was **very** upfront. There was something about the language he used which even made we wonder if he was a wee bit crazy. But as I listened my eyes were opened and I recognised him as someone who was **filled with the Spirit** and talking about his real **authentic** experience of Jesus. My initial impressions were wrong. I needed to spend time with him, listen to him and sit at table with him before I could recognise Jesus in him and hear God speaking to me through him.

The Emmaus story which we heard in our gospel today makes the same point. If the disciples had let Jesus carry on his way and not offered him hospitality, they would never have recognised him for who he was. They needed to **invite him in** and make him **welcome**. Hospitality has huge significance in the bible particularly hospitality to strangers. It is in entertaining three strangers that Abraham and Sarah hear the astonishing news from God that Sarah will, at her great age, bear a son and that Abraham's descendants will be in number like the grains of sand on the shore or the stars in the heaven. And the writer to the Hebrews tells us *'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for some by doing so have entertained angels unawares'*

Strangers, angels. Two words we don't always associate with each other. In fact we teach our children about stranger/ danger and we ourselves can be a bit wary of people who we don't know. We like to check people's credentials, check that the chap we are letting into our home to read the meter has the appropriate ID. And of course there is nothing wrong with that particularly if we are elderly or live alone. **But if we are to live in obedience to Christ**, we must find a way of offering hospitality to strangers and I would suggest that this is where we need to remember that we are the Body of Christ, made up of **many** members. This is something we can and must do as a **community of believers**. And this is something we **are** doing every time we open our building for worship. **All** are welcome in this place, all are welcome at God's table.

When we move into our refurbished building we will be extending this welcome by having it open every day and having 'drop-in times' when strangers can walk in and sit at table with members of the congregation and chat over a cuppa. And when we do so, let's be ready to have our eyes opened to see Jesus revealed to us in the guise of a stranger.

It was no coincidence that Don turned up here on Thursday. We were greatly blessed by his presence with us. God wants to bless us. Let's go out this week prepared to meet him in unlikely people and improbable places.