

Acts 19:1-17

Luke 17:5-10

Introduction

I don't know if you are familiar with the Specsavers adverts shown on TV that demonstrate in humorous ways what happens when you can't see properly. I ran an over fifties group in Hackney and we used to laugh about the one where the fitness instructor inadvertently gets a group of elderly people exercising energetically

But my favourite one is the one where a vet mistakes a fur hat for a cat and is about to resuscitate it because it doesn't seem to be alive.

The difference between how things appear and how they actually are is an important one and is one of the things that is dealt with in today's readings which focus on the authenticity of faith.

Faith is about relationship as we see very clearly in our reading from Acts which shows what happens when relationship isn't part of our faith and actually questions whether faith without relationship is faith at all

Acts chapter 19 describes the first part of Paul's ministry in Ephesus. Ephesus was, as were so many of the places where he preached the Gospel a Pagan city. In Ephesus, which was the main city of the Roman province of Asia, the pagan deity worshipped was Artemis or Diana. There were also many sorcerers and exorcists' working in the city and it was a place of superstition. It was a free city with its own assembly and was a meeting place of various cultural influences. It had a large Jewish population who enjoyed special privileges.

One of the themes that seems to run through the narrative is that of belief and more especially the outward working of our faith, how it is seen and expressed in life and in our relationship with Jesus.

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Paul's first encounter is with 12 men (the minimum number for a synagogue). They appeared to be disciples or claimed to be disciples but he clearly had some doubts because he asked them if they had received the Holy Spirit. They were expressing faith but showing no evidence of the presence of the Spirit in their lives so he asked them about it. Their response showed that although they had some knowledge of Jesus they had not heard that the Holy Spirit had been given at Pentecost.

So he asked them what baptism they had received. They responded that they had received John's baptism not Christian baptism. So in other words they were still living in the Old Testament which culminated with the ministry of John. They did not understand that a new age had been ushered in by Jesus or that those who believe in him and are baptised into him receive the distinctive blessing of the new age, the indwelling Spirit. Somehow knowledge of Jesus without the Christian message of Jesus' resurrection and the outpouring of his spirit seems to have spread to Ephesus and elsewhere.

What Paul was concerned about was that unless someone has faith in Jesus and the relationship with him created and shown by his indwelling Holy Spirit they cannot actually be called Christian. They are like a light bulb that isn't plugged in. It might call itself a light bulb and look like a lightbulb but it doesn't function as a lightbulb and shine light into its environment

So Paul began to teach them the full gospel and reminded them what John the Baptist had said. His baptism had been firmly associated with repentance; the turning away from wrongdoing and turning to God. But at the same time it had to be accompanied by the concrete fruits of repentance in the form of a changed heart and the corresponding changed way of life.

Once they understood what was missing in their lives they put their trust in Jesus of whom John had spoken. They

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were then baptised as Christians and Paul laid hands on them, receiving them into the Christian church and the Holy Spirit came upon them and showed his presence by enabling them to speak in tongues and prophesy. In other words they experienced a mini-Pentecost.

The norm of Christian experience is repentance, faith in Jesus, water baptism and the gift of the Spirit. Their experience had been lacking.

Sometimes this passage is taken to mean that Christians who already know Jesus and believe and trust in him need a second special anointing of the spirit and many Pentecostal churches teach that their members have to be "Baptised in the Spirit" and demonstrate that by speaking in tongues. This teaching misunderstands what this passage is about. This is about people who have not fully put their trust in Jesus and who had not received him into their lives in the first place.

What is apparent in the experiences of Paul in Ephesus is this emphasis on relationship with Jesus Christ being the heart of Christianity. We can delude ourselves as the twelve disciples did, that we have a faith in God but unless we have recognised and received Jesus as our Lord and Saviour that faith will do us no good. We certainly won't grow because we will not have the Holy Spirit in our lives and it is the Holy Spirit that gives us gifts and produces fruit in our lives. We need to be in relationship with him.

It also highlights the fact that our power in ministry and in our lives comes from our relationship with Jesus himself. In Matthew's gospel Jesus tells his disciples that it is not enough to call him Lord we need to show that he is our Lord by obeying him and putting his teaching into practice in our lives. Here the Sons of Sceva thought that simply using the name of Jesus, as some sort of magic talisman would give them the power over spirits. But they did not know Jesus, they weren't in relationship with him. They described him as 'Jesus, whom Paul preaches' not as Jesus my Lord and saviour. It is only though

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our relationship with Jesus that we have access to the power of the Holy Spirit in our own lives and in order to minister his love and healing to others.

Today can I invite you to examine the nature of your relationship with Jesus? Is it a living and active relationship that produces fruit and growth, that enables you to show his love and power to others or has it become a stagnant relationship that is no longer active and growing or perhaps even a relationship that hasn't got past first base?

Do you simply know Jesus as someone who one of your friends or relatives believes in and talks about? Does it feel as if Jesus is someone you once knew well but don't speak to so often today? As you look at your life can you see how God has changed you and dealt with your sin and failure or do you feel as if you are continually struggling with the same old issues in your life?

Sometimes God challenges us about some aspect of our life that we have not dealt with and unless we face it and learn to allow him to deal with it we can get stuck and our faith stagnates.

This happened to me after I had been a Christian about ten years. God clearly spoke to me about the lack of forgiveness in my life. He made it clear to me as I read the Bible and as I prayed that unless I learned to forgive those who had hurt me I would never grow as a Christian and more than that I would never find that deeper relationship with him I longed for. In essence unless I repented in every area of my life and allowed him to change all of me my relationship with him would be limited to a one dimensional experience.

That was a really tough one for me because I had been very badly treated by my step mother and literally hated her. The thought of forgiving was not something I could contemplate.

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But God persisted with me and asked me, "Angie, If you are not ready to forgive might you be willing to forgive?" "No" I said, "I can't". "So would you be willing to be willing to forgive?" "Not sure" I said, "I might be". So God took me back to where he could begin to change my heart and gradually he enabled me to be willing to forgive and eventually brought me to the place where I could go to my stepmother and actually ask her to forgive *ME* for hating her. It was a long and painful process because the hurt was real and deep but God walked with me through the change and brought me out to a fuller, deeper, much richer relationship with him, a relationship of life and effectiveness.

Can I ask you this morning to think about your Christian life. If your Christian life feels drab and colourless can I ask you to examine your heart to find if there is anything hindering your relationship with Jesus. Is there a grudge you are harbouring? Is there a sin you have not confessed or turned away from? Is there someone you cannot forgive? For each of us it will be something different, but if we feel our Christian life is sluggish then we need to look and see what it is that is blocking up our relationship with Jesus and allow the Holy Spirit to fill us to the brim and not just dwell in part of our lives.