

# God: Life-changer

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, All Saints' Belmont, May 9<sup>th</sup> 2021

Here's one to think about – number life-changing experiences you've had over the years. Common to many of us is marriage and bringing up children. For some it would be parting of a loved one, so difficult. Then there would be 'career choices' – for me while at university changing from being on a path to secondary teaching to training for ordained ministry. Times have changed on the employment scene – no longer can one expect to have a job for life. It is likely most of us have had more than one in our working life. Then comes retirement and possibilities that open up – including for travel. For me I look back and note the number of opportunities – overseas and in our beautiful country. I remember returning home from the first voyage to islands of the southern ocean going to bed and feeling the rocking of the ship in the Roaring Forties, going to the beach and seeing seagulls which looked like albatrosses, cana lilies and hydrangeas that looked like the megaherbs of the islands.

For me also the *spiritual experiences* that change lives and perspectives. Early on it was as a youth pastor introducing teenagers to the beauty of creation through adventure camping. Then came the challenge of fulltime parish ministry, Life in the Spirit Seminars, visiting lecturers and upskilling courses influencing ones perspective. Thinking of an English bishop John Taylor introducing 'prayer of quiet' what has become a significant aspect of my prayer life. Be-ing, in the presence of God in creation – that worked so well in lockdown. Think today of ones you've experienced over the years.....

My sermon theme today is '*God – life-changer*'.

All this will help up towards reflecting on Peter's life-changing experience after Jesus' resurrection and leading the early church down new paths. In case we missed it, as well as the gospel focus of these Sundays we have been working through the Acts of the Apostles. Thus diverting from Mark's gospel to John's account of the disciples experiencing the risen Christ, then came the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the believers 'gathered together.' They prayed great believing prayers – one I especially like begins 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea and everything in them.....' In recent Sunday readings we've heard of the vibrant life of the early church in those first days, of Philip meeting the Ethiopian official on the road and baptising him there and then, and the remarkable healing of a man with disabilities.

1) But there's an elephant in the room. The question was what to do about non-Jews who were attracted to the message ('good news') of Jesus, bringing life-changing to many through repentance and baptism. The Jews had significant customs as part of their faith – circumcision, food laws and who to fellowship with, the men disciples were all steeped in this faith and practice, and Peter in particular. God acted in ways that changed Peter's life, and indeed became part of the kerygma, the good news message. It took first a vision when he was visiting the Roman soldier Cornelius. It was round the middle of the day and Peter was on a rooftop praying, and noticed he was hungry. Then came the vision inviting Peter to kill and eat an animal. For Jews that would be unclean. Peter resisted and a voice came to him: 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' Cornelius had also had a dream to invite Peter for a meal. Peter and the invitation is accepted and they both share these heavenly experiences, and together with others present share in a meal.

And so we come to the meeting that is this morning's first reading. Peter and some fellow believers and Cornelius and family have gathered in Simon's house. Peter shares: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality'. Thus the kerygma – 'Jesus Christ, he is Lord of all.' This includes a succinct account of Jesus' earthly ministry: 'God anointed Jesus of

Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses.....' Thus here is example of how the gospel message of Jesus transcends race and cultures.

2) Then comes a testimony about Jesus' death and for a second time in the kerygma: 'They put him (Jesus) to death by *hanging him on a tree* but God raised him on the third day, allowing him to appear not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.' [Also 5.30] It's a pretty 'earthy' statement, and reminds of a very early statement on the theme of conservation – from Deuteronomy (20) 'If you besiege a town for a long time you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take fruit from them you must not cut them down'. When in Australia on my son's property I was reminded of this with 'a Christ tree' with branches outstretched looking like a cross, and which amazingly he's told me survived the devastating bushfires of a couple of years ago. May I also make a comment on this about our understanding of scripture – its only in recent years biblical scholars have come to realise women played a much more significant role in the discipleship community. May I suggest that's also belatedly happening with scriptural understanding of creation – that there also is an appreciation of the fragile ecological balance in which we exist on planet earth. We are aware of numbers of references in the Psalms. Less so I suggest in the Acts of the Apostles. Note again that prayer introduction from Acts 4: 'Sovereign God, who made the heaven and the earth and everything in them...' St Paul testified also to this in his speech to the people of Athens, 'The God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth.....' (Acts 17.22ff).

3) A further aspect of the kerygma comes in the final section of the reading. Some bible commentators have described this as the *Pentecost of the Gentile world*. Following Peter's inspiring 'sermon' of which we have the brief outline it concludes with 'while Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word'. It was so unexpected that the Jewish believers with Peter were astounded that the gift of 'the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles'. A comment somewhat patronising, yet it had happened to those gathered – Cornelius' relatives and close friends. They were praying and praising God, received the Holy Spirit, and were baptised. Quite a celebration! Thus an aspect of Holy Spirit's working, as a life-changer. I'm mindful also of Paul's dramatic conversion on the Damascus road, and down through history – St Francis also, from a life of luxury to be servant of the poor.

4) Here too the *Spirit can be a life-changer – for our parish*. We have embarked on a 6 week focus 'Mission Action Plan'. Here we consider our parish life as at present, and possible directions and focus for the future, over the next five years. 'Mapping will 'help us sharpen the focus and provide clarity for our church.' And it needs our involvement to join in – to help our church grow in number and faithfulness to Jesus. Thus there's a four 'r' component: *receiving* (listening), *reflecting* on the past, *responding* and *refocusing*. And it needs your input. Thus together we can develop a 'Mission action plan.'

*Thus to conclude* – think of how through history God has called and shaped people's lives – of the Hebrews: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, David from shepherd boy to king. Then the early church as it took shape. Right to our own time: in our lives, and our church as we pray in faith trusting for the future.