

Following last week as we looked at the conversion of Saul, the Church is now in a period of freedom and peace. The threat of persecution is far less now that Saul has found Jesus, and yet despite the peace, the Church still had its enemies. The Church is thriving and growing more and more, but sickness and death remain. And for us it's a reminder that we haven't arrived yet. This world is not our home. Sickness and worry and trouble are still a reality. It feels at times for some that they move from one issue to the next. And yet God is not absent – for some of you, you just need to hear that this morning, that he is with you. In the midst of what at times can seem really tough, we have Jesus who raises our hopes and allows us to lift our heads. He declares that in this world we will have trouble, but remember that he has overcome the world. This world is not our home, we are simply passing through, but God can use us in an incredible way as his witnesses.

Today I want us to think about the amazing thing that God is doing. We see it in many different situations in our church and in other

church communities. He is bringing healing to our community, He is encouraging us to get involved in his mission by helping those around us, and he wants to do an amazing thing in us as we change our attitude towards him.

I am confident in declaring that God is not dead in our community. Yes at times we look at the issues, whether that's anti-social behaviour, or the lack of facilities for our young people in the town, or the rise in poverty, or whatever the issues are, but remember that God is at work because he loves the people that he has made.

The early church that we read about this morning cared for people. Even though we focus sometimes on the numbers of people surrendering their lives to Christ in the book of Acts, it was more than just a mass of people, and our passage today focuses in on individuals to show how much God cares for everyone. God sends Peter to Lydda. Now Lydda was 25 miles north west of Jerusalem, it's a crossroads town where the road that led from Egypt to Syria intersects with the road

leading from Joppa to Jerusalem. But what's distinct about it for this story is that its population were mostly Gentiles. Here we see God at work as he is already doing a work in Peter to break down some of the prejudices that exist in his heart towards anyone who is not a Jew. And so what is most striking about this passage is the impact that God makes on individuals. God loves individuals – in a world that identifies each of us by number, it is good to know that we are so much more to him. In Isaiah 43 God says to his people “I have summoned you by name; you are mine”. That's how much he cares for each of us and our needs.

I bet you right now if I was to ask you to call out your National Insurance Number you will be able to do it – mine is NX 07 66 21 D. You see, each of you is a number on a computer system, your personal data is stored in many different places, but to all these organisations that hold your information, you are only another line of data. Have you ever noticed that when you phone about your bank account or your mortgage, they are interested in a reference number more than your actual

name. If you don't have your reference number they then interrogate you with a series of additional security questions. God doesn't think of you as a number. Have you noticed that our reading is filled with people – There is Aeneas, Tabitha, and there Peter. Jesus throughout his life was caught up with individuals. When he died on the cross he died for individuals – he died for Jonny, he died for Josh, for.....

You see Satan wants us to panic and become so busy with the amount of people in need within our community, and yet God gives us the strategy of looking after one at a time. Because he knows that as one person truly discovers his love for them, they will tell someone else. Today folks he is interested in you. He is interested in your worry. He is interested in your life and your hopes & dreams. Here in our story is the picture of healing, we see how care is focused on one person, not a crowd. Aeneas had been confined to his bed for eight years. It's hard to imagine the sense of helplessness he would have felt and the loneliness which he would have experienced. Peter's visit alone would

have been a tremendous encouragement to him. I wonder today have you ever thought of the incredible impact that you could make by visiting one person – for that one person to know they are valued by God today. I was in a lady's house a few weeks back and she's in her bed 24 hours a day. Her bed faces a wall with a picture on it. That's all she sees each day, apart from the carers coming in to feed and change her. The back of her head is at the window and as I talked to her, I could see the new house being built on the Hillhead road. Every day all she can see is a wall.

Those of us who have the energy to come out to Church on a Sunday can so often take for granted the blessings we have. And Peter through the healing power of Jesus gives this man a new hope. He is healed not just instantaneously but notice that Peter instructs him also to roll up his mat. Why? Because it was to declare to the man that his healing was complete. He would not need the mat ever again. This story folks is not just a story of healing, this is the story of our God who in the midst of thousands being healed, he knew this one man, he knew his need, and he met

his need. Today folks, be confident that in our community, in this Church family, maybe in you today, God knows our needs, and he wants to bring healing. I'd encourage you to hear those words and speak to someone today, either the prayer ministry team or myself so that we can pray with you.

If today know of someone facing tough times, or maybe that's you, listen to Jesus' words in John 10:27 'My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me', or in Matthew 10:30 'The very hairs of your head are numbered'. Remember today that you are not just one in the crowd. You are precious to God.

If the church is going to be what God wants it to be, we have to have a heart for individuals, to care for them, and to let individuals know that they are loved by God. Our core values as a Church say that we have a pastoral heart, and the only way this works is when we deal with a person one-to-one. So let's not get caught up in thinking about the mammoth task of telling our town about Jesus, if we are not going to start with the individual that we know.

In your collection of friends and neighbours there is someone who is currently going through a divorce, there's a person grieving today, there's someone who is so low today. These people need to know there is someone that they can turn to. We, unlike any other part of society, have the answer, and that answer is Jesus. You can sit and talk to them in a coffee shop until your blue in the face with all kinds of nice words, but the only words that truly bring hope is when you tell them about how much they are loved by Jesus.

The next thing I want us to consider is the life of Tabitha.

You might not have picked up from the reading that it says Tabitha was a disciple. This is actually the only place in the New Testament where this word is used in the feminine form. But Luke here wants to recognise her as a servant of God, who used her spiritual gifts, because she had a heart for the poor and neglected widows. And so these grieving women are gathered around wearing the very garments that she, with love and skill

had woven for their covering. They stood as a mute testament to the change that Jesus had already brought in her life, as her selfless works testified to her faith in God. She blessed the life of others through her ministry.

Only two Thursdays ago I had the privilege to worship along with a large number of people, thanking God for the life of a wonderful woman who I would describe as another Tabitha. Not only was she a committed disciple of God, pointing many people to Jesus, but she was a woman of prayer who interceded for many people over the years even while she was sick in her hospital bed, and like Tabitha had the amazing skill of dress making and needle work. In fact in the very church that we worshipped, there were many examples around the walls of her ministry.

The Church today needs Tabithas because our ministry is a ministry that helps others. How will you be used in the ministry of the church to help others? Recently I have encouraged all of you to look at the little deeds that you can be involved in within the

ministry life of this church, and so to help you think more about this today, to help us all think about the ministry of Tabitha, I have left a paper clip on your pew.

This clip may seem quite insignificant. All it is is a bit of wire. But the value of the clip is not in the amount of wire in it. It's actually in how useful it becomes when it is moulded into the shape of the clip. You see this clip is not flashy. Similarly the Church is not about having the most flashy abilities and skills. It's actually about having people who are willing to be moulded and shaped by God (a bit like this metal being shaped into this paper clip) for his service. I'm sure that Tabitha could have used her skills to make a good living for herself, but scripture says that she was always doing good and helping the poor. She invested in the widows and that was on her heart. Please take home that little paper clip today, and remember that God's Church is not looking for the big things, he's just looking for servants who are not focused on their own ego but on humbly blessing others. Are you serving today? If not, why not? Tabitha was surrounded by the many widows who she had

blessed, and pointed to Jesus. When it comes to the day where someone is giving the story of your life, what will they say? Where you willing to be moulded and shaped to serve God wherever he wanted you, or will you have simply looked after yourself.

I want to take this opportunity to thank you that you are a church community that when one person suffers, everyone wants to support. We have so many examples of Tabitha, but we always need more.

So God wants to do a healing work in each person – he knows everyone by name, God encourages his Church to help others – to be moulded for his mission, but then finally we want to recognise what God wants to do in us.

Now that Chapter 9 is finished, we won't hear any more of Aeneas, nor of Tabitha, and the fact of the matter is that the healing done in them was for this life, and the raising from the dead provided only a temporary respite from the physical death that inevitably comes to all of us. But the change that is beginning to take place in Peter—that's a significant one, even

though we might lose it in verse 43, which seems almost a “throwaway” verse—but Luke put it here for a reason, and it is significant! Verse 43 simply says, ‘Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon’.

We all know the incredible hospitality that is demonstrated by the early Church throughout the Book of Acts, and here we see Simon the tanner opening up his home readily. Our understanding of the significance of this hospitality is clouded by the fact that we don’t live in 1st-century Palestine, but the fact is that the religious teachers considered tanning to be an unclean trade. Tanners worked with dead animals in a smelly, unsanitary environment, and their contact with these animals rendered them ceremonially unclean. Peter was a devout Jew. So the idea of staying with such a person, would be a bit like me putting on a Man Utd top and going to Old Trafford later. It’s going to sicken me in the pit of my stomach. It’s totally against my values. Yet Peter did something that was so against his values. You see, God was beginning to work a real change in Peter’s attitude towards outsiders, towards those whom he’d have

previously seen as unclean, as outcasts. We could say that, in one sense, in comparison with the healing and the raising from the dead, there was nothing all that miraculous or spectacular about the change that came over Peter. But if God was going to do a work among the Gentiles, it was imperative that the leadership of the early church would have an attitude adjustment toward them, that Peter and the others would not see them as unclean individuals, second-class citizens, but as people for whom the same Christ died as died for the Jews. I want you to hold this thought: it will help as we move into Acts 10.

So there's lots today for all of us.

Today God wants to speak to all of us, but in particular to some of you who are feeling so low that you don't know what the answer is. Today God wants you to know that he's here for you. He knows you by name, he loves you, he cherishes you as his child, and he wants to bring healing to your body, to your mind, and to your spirit, so come to him today and receive from his love.

Today, God is speaking to some of you, and calling you to service. Tabitha's desire to serve came from a heart that knew she was deeply loved, and that resulted in a ministry, not a job which brought blessing to many. Today ask God to reveal again his love to you, and then reflecting on the depths of how far he was willing to go in his love for you, how does that reflect on your service to him.

Finally, for some of you, today you realise that God is wanting to do something new in you like he was doing in Peter. You realise that there are prejudices stored up, or reservations, or maybe even the sin of busyness in your own life, that causes a barrier to how God wants to truly use you. Are you really open to what God wants to do through you, or is there something stopping you today. Bring this to God now and be released for the exciting opportunities that God has planned for you, in the way that Peter would.