

## **The beginning of the community of faith**

I have returned to my son's house for the last time. I will not be leaving here again, except to return at last to be with my Lord Jesus in heaven. These last few years have been the most exciting and rewarding part of my long and very blessed life, but they have not been what I would ever have expected. If you had said to me even five years ago



that I would leave my home in Emmaus and move to Jerusalem to live with strangers, I would have said you were deluded. If you had told me that I would reject all my children's and grand children's pleas to return home, I would not have believed you. If you had told me that I would spend my final years waiting for the Second Coming, at the End of Time, I would have wondered at your sanity. I have done all these things, done them willingly and done them in the name of the Lord Jesus who died on the Cross at Golgotha, rose from the dead on the third day, was seen by others and least of all by me, as we have constantly borne witness. When he finally ascended to his Father in heaven he sent the Holy Spirit to comfort us, protect us and give us the courage to speak about what we had seen and heard.

I have listened many times to the Apostle Peter bear witness to the Ascension of the Lord Jesus. He was there on the mountain with the other Apostles when Jesus finally left us and was taken up to heaven in a cloud to be with his Father at last, promising to send us a comforter. The Apostles returned to Jerusalem afterwards, and since then I have seen them daily in the Temple worshipping God and waiting for the promised help.

Then the day came when all was changed. I don't know why I felt restless that morning, but I felt compelled to leave the Temple where I had been living for several weeks, since the day of Resurrection, and go into the city. I was walking through the market place looking idly at the stalls smelling some of the myriad of fruit and vegetables on sale and admiring a variety materials woven in bright colours and patterns. I had stopped by the stall of a worker in metal, and was admiring the dexterity with which he was indenting a pattern around the rim of a small bowl, when I heard a loud bang. I looked around the metal workers cabin to see what had fallen from shelves, but he was looking over my shoulder with a look of horror on his face.

I turned round to see what was scaring him, and saw that in the part of the city where the Apostles were living, flames of fire were sitting on the roof of a house. People began running, some from the fire, some to it, eager to help to get people out. Others went towards the well to get water. In a city where houses are built so close together, it does not take much for fire to spread and destroy many buildings, and kill people. I ran as fast as my old bones would carry me, towards the house where my friends were, fearful that the Roman or Religious Authorities had taken matters into their own hands. What if one of their agents had set fire to the house to kill those they kept telling us had removed the body of the Lord Jesus from his tomb, and then spread lies, telling people that he was risen from the dead? If that were the case then they were certainly afraid of the truth, that the Lord Jesus really was risen from the dead! When I eventually managed to push my way towards the house I saw a line of people with buckets of water, trying to douse flames that did not want to be doused, and did not move or change or seem to consume the house.

After a few minutes the people at the front of the queue stopped throwing water and looked up puzzled. Whatever was happening to the house it didn't appear to be fire, even though it looked like it. Just then the front door of the house was thrown open, and my friends, the Apostles ran out, and each of them had flames around them. Before anyone could throw a bucket of water over them, the flames around them went, disappeared. Everyone involuntarily looked up. The flames from the roof had vanished as well. Shoulders began to sag, and buckets of water were lowered to the ground.

Then the Apostles began to move out into the gathered crowd, their faces lit with a holy light, and they began speaking urgently to the people around them. As they spoke people gathered around them and listened, their eyes wonderingly on their faces. After a while I could see that some people were beginning to look around them, and were registering what others were hearing from different speakers. I could see the odd one or two moving from group to group, and then begin to back away from what was going on. As one passed me, I grabbed his arm, and asked him what was going on. 'They are telling us about the Lord Jesus, about Yahweh, and about the Holy Spirit which has come upon them and given them the words to talk to us. But what is really weird is that no matter which one I go and listen to, I hear them speak in a different language. I speak a number of languages, but these men seem to be fluent in the languages of all of the people who are gathered here today, and there are devout Jews here from every part of the Roman Empire and beyond. But these men are Galileans, you can tell from their dress. How can all these provincial fishermen and farmers be such good linguists? They must be drunk!'

My captive observer had not noticed that Peter was coming up behind him, and had heard the last part of this conversation. 'How can we be drunk?' he laughed 'It is still early morning! No, I am filled with the Holy Spirit – you saw the flames. I don't know how, but everyone here is able to hear and understand in their own languages; and I am still just a poor plain speaking Galilean fisherman who has only his native

tongue at his command.' The man just stared at him, then turned and walked away.

With the Holy Spirit giving them speech and words the Apostles began to speak in any place, at any time, about the Lord Jesus. If the authorities had been scared before, they must have been becoming even more paranoid now. There seemed no stopping this new sect who seemed to be able to draw people in, and to threaten the stability that they had hoped the death of Jesus would have brought back. When the Apostles were not in the market place, or by the well talking to the women collecting water, or at the city gates talking with the old men putting the world to rights, they were in the Temple loudly praising God and ignoring the gentle ritual chanting of the Temple Priests. Many came to believe in the Lord Jesus through their words.

Away from the conversations and the conversions, the Apostles, particularly Peter were tireless. We all believed that the coming of the Holy Spirit signified that the Second Coming of Jesus, at the End of Time was imminent. When after a few days, it didn't appear to be coming quickly, Peter gathered together all of the believers and told them of his plan. That we should live together, and pray together in the Temple. We would sell all our belongings and bring our money to the Apostles, and they would give to each of us as much as we needed. We would feed the poor and destitute in the name of the Lord Jesus. I hurried off to sell my house in Emmaus, and all of my belongings, and I laid my money at the feet of the Apostles. It was such an exciting time. Every morning when I opened my eyes, I hoped that this would be my last day, and that today would be the End of Time.

Weeks have turned into months, and months have now turned into years. Our zeal for the Lord has not diminished, but it has changed. When our money began to run out, those who were able, took up their old jobs again and began to support the work of the community by their labour. Those who were not gifted with work used other gifts for the benefit of the community. I found that my poor skills of cooking and with healing herbs allowed me to care for those in the city who were sick and ill, and while I was tending them, I could tell them of my encounter with the Lord Jesus. Some I managed to bring to him as well. Some members of the community of faith left the city and began to travel the merchant routes from village to village, city to city spreading out across the known world. We sent them out with money and food to help the poor and sick of body mind and spirit that they found along their routes. When we began to have problems here in Jerusalem, when food became scarce, the communities of faith sent food and money to us, to strengthen us to continue our work here.

Life has not really been as easy as that though. The authorities have challenged us when they felt we were getting too dangerous to them, but our faith has kept us going. Some of our number have been imprisoned, some have been tortured to try to get them to renounce the Lord Jesus. Some have even died for their faith. Sometimes the religious authorities hunt us out like rabid dogs, and the fiercest of their hunters is the Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus.

In the last few weeks my strength has gone, and I know that I have not much longer before I meet my Lord Jesus again. My community in Jerusalem have brought me back here to my son's house in Emmaus, so that I can see him and my daughters and grandchildren again for the last time. As my brothers and sisters in Christ, yes, I even managed to bring them to the Lord Jesus, they will care for me now, and hopefully be able to rejoice with me even when they mourn their loss, and my gain and unutterable joy.