

In Jerusalem the pace of daily additions to the community was maintained. There was always an attentive crowd ready to hear the Twelve expound the doctrine of the Master - which was then followed by a prolonged baptismal ceremony, when each one was asked directly if they believed in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and that he was the Messiah promised by God. Only when there was an unconditional answer, would the baptism proceed, and the newly immersed candidate would then come under the pressure of the hands of the Twelve, to receive the Holy Spirit.

As the days passed, Peter agreed that those who had been members of the Seventy, and who had been sent out by Jesus in pairs to heal and baptise, should assist with the water baptisms, but the act of baptism with the Holy Spirit was reserved to the Twelve. In the evenings, the day would be concluded with prayer and the breaking of bread, and a blessing spoken over the community.

During the daily activities, many were healed by the Twelve, and many other signs and miracles were forthcoming, and a great sense of awe pervaded the community. Another development was that of surrendering personal wealth and property, some selling all they had and entrusting it to the Twelve for general distribution as each one was in need. Joseph bar Nabus gave the storehouse to the community so that they had a headquarters within the city.

Their daily observance of the law was maintained, nothing was taken away from the ancient faith of their fathers because of their new-found belief. In one mind they kept up their daily attendance in the Temple - those who couldn't crowd into the storehouse, broke bread in private houses - they shared their meals and joyfully praised God for his blessings. In general terms, they were well respected in the eyes of the rest of the

population - and steadily, daily, their numbers increased.

One day soon after, at about three in the afternoon - the hour of prayer, found Peter and John making their way to the Temple. As they approached the entrance which was called the Beautiful Gate, they saw a man propped against the wall. Peter touched John's arm and paused. They watched as those who entered the Temple threw a coin in his direction.

John murmured.

"He's there every day, someone carries him here and leaves him to beg. He's been crippled from birth."

Peter moved forward again and paused before the man, who looked up expectantly.

"In the love of God, help me to buy bread!"

Peter stared at him intently, and John did likewise. Peter said firmly.

"Look at us!"

The man stared at them, expecting a donation. Peter continued.

"I have no gold or silver - but what I have I give to you! In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah - I say to you - Walk!!"

Peter suddenly stooped and grasped him by the right hand and pulled him up. The man started to sag, but then his feet and ankles grew strong enough to carry him. He sprang up, stood staring in incredulity, and started to walk.

He went into the Temple, leaping and praising God as he did so. Many nearby recognised him as the man who had always sat at the gate and begged. They gathered round, murmuring in wonderment at what had happened to him.

Peter and John had followed him, and he ran back to clutch them. By this time, they were in Solomon's Porch, and the crowd gathered around them. Peter shouted above the noise.

"Men of Israel, why are you so surprised to see this? Why do you stare at us as if we made this man walk by out of our own power?"

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - the God of our fathers - has given the highest honour to his servant Jesus - the man you committed for trial and rejection in Pilate's court. You rejected the one who was holy and righteous when Pilate tried to release him. You called instead for the release of a murderer - and made sure that Jesus was condemned. But God raised him up from the dead! - Of that we are witnesses!

In the name of Jesus, by awakening faith, this man has been strengthened. You know him, you've seen him often enough - and now his faith has completely healed him - you can see it for yourselves!

My friends, I know very well that you acted in ignorance - and for that matter, so did our rulers. This is how God fulfilled what he foretold through the mouth of the prophets. He foretold that his Messiah should suffer. I say to you repent - and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out. The Lord will then grant you a time of grace in which to grow, and then he will send you the Messiah he has already appointed - that is, Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time of universal redemption comes - of which God spoke through his holy prophets.

Moses said:

'The Lord God will raise up a prophet for you from among yourselves as he raised up me; you shall listen to everything he says to you, and anyone who refuses to listen to that prophet must be extirpated from Israel.'

So said all the prophets, from Samuel onwards; with one voice they all predicted this present time.

You are the heirs of the prophets; you are within the covenant which God made with your fathers, when he said to Abraham: 'and in your offspring all the families on earth shall find a blessing. When God raised up his servant, he sent him to you first, to bring you blessings by turning everyone of you from your wicked ways.'

Solomon's Porch was crowded by this time, and others were streaming across the Court of the Gentiles attracted by the commotion. It wasn't long before the Controller of

the Temple, with guards, together with priests and Sadducees - who were furious that Peter and John were teaching about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead - forced their way through to confront them. One priest, red in the face with anger commanded the Controller.

“Arrest them! They’re causing a disturbance to the peace of the Temple.”

The guards took hold of them, and they didn’t resist or argue. They were put in the cells for the night for it was already evening. The arrest did nothing to counteract the effect their message had had on some who had listened, and many became believers. With this new influx, the number of men alone in the community reached five thousand.

Some of the brethren who were attending the temple for prayer, saw that they had been arrested and hurried back to the community at the storehouse and told what they had witnessed. Matthew and the remaining eight of the Twelve tried to reassure Salome - who was now threatened with the loss of a son - and Mariamne.

“They’re keeping them overnight - they won’t deal with them after sunset. Try not to be concerned, Simon and John know how to look after themselves - and the Lord’s with them!”

Salome responded in her usual blunt way.

“These are the same men who took Jesus and gave him to Pilate to crucify. Do you think they’ll have greater mercy on Simon and John?”

Matthew held his ground.

“I was there when Jesus told Simon that when he was old, men would bind him and take him where he didn’t want to go. I believe it isn’t now the time for Simon to be bound and taken away - and Jesus also said something strange about John - Peter asked the question whether John would still be live when the Master returned. Jesus looked at him in that quiet way and said: ‘What’s it to you if he remains until I come again?’ - In other words, it’s none of your business!

Sisters! The Master is setting up his work through us - both Peter and John have a

great task to perform - the Master always told us: 'Don't worry - it isn't my time yet, they won't harm me' - I believe the same applies for them. What we can do is bow ourselves in earnest prayer and plead for the Lord to deliver his servants from the hands of wicked men!"

On the next day, Caiaphas called together the Sanhedrin. Present were Jewish rulers - although a notable exception was Joseph of Arimathea - together with the temple elders, doctors of the law. Annas, once the high priest, Caiaphas himself, and Jonathon and Alexander and those who were of the High Priestly family. It was an impressive array, and it was intended to be so.

Peter and John were brought up from the cells and found themselves arraigned before the most powerful in the land, and in surroundings which were intended to impress with their sheer opulence. The whole scenario was intended to carry the message: 'You are puny, uncultured creatures who dare to try to stand against the might and dignity you see before you'. The words weren't said, of course, but the message was clear.

One of the elders demanded to know.

"By what authority, or in whose name, do you dare to cause incitement within the temple?"

Peter felt a surge of power within him. The Holy Spirit took his tongue and he answered.

"Rulers of the people and elders. If you are asking about the help given to a sick man, and if you are asking by what means he was cured, we can answer that easily - and the answer is for you and for all the people of Israel. He was cured in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, whom you crucified, and whom God has raised from the dead!

It is by his name that this man stands here before you fit and well! Jesus of Nazareth is the stone rejected by the builders. He has become the keystone - and you are the builders. There is no salvation possible from any other source, for there is no other name under heaven upon whom men can call, by which we can receive salvation!"

Peter had answered without a hint of fear, and the members of the Council looked at

each other, knowing he and John were untrained laymen. Caiaphas and Annas had said nothing, but they knew well enough with whom they were dealing. The man who had been healed was standing with them.

Caiaphas nodded to the captain of the guard to remove them while the council deliberated. When they were gone, he stood up in his place.

“Something has to be done about these men. With the death of the Galilean, we had hoped his followers would disperse - and so it seemed for a while, but now they’re back in Jerusalem, and ever since they’ve returned, there’s been one report after another about their activities - and now we’re confronted with this man, who is now able to walk, whereas before yesterday, he was a helpless cripple. The people know it as well as ourselves, it isn’t something we can deny.”

The High Priest paused, there was no doubt that there had been a gradual change in the man since the incident in the temple, when the veil across the entrance to the Holy of Holies had been rent from floor to ceiling. It was almost as if he had been struck a personal body blow. The veil represented much more than a separation between the Holy of Holies and the Sanctuary - it symbolised his own separateness. The veil separated the High Priest from the common herd - he alone could enter there, but on that day, the mystique it had hidden, had been revealed for all to see. It was as if Caiaphas himself had been stripped naked before the people. In the ensuing weeks, he had appeared more and more uncertain, whereas before, he had shown a total confidence in his own undoubted abilities. Caiaphas went on.

“We have to stop this pernicious doctrine spreading any further among the people, our position becomes increasingly undermined. I propose that we call them back, and forbid them to preach about this Jesus, or to proclaim his teachings.”

They called back Peter and John. Caiaphas stared down at them, and for a long moment, Peter held his eyes. The High Priest commanded abruptly.

“You are expressly forbidden to proclaim any doctrine which is said to originate from Jes

us of Nazareth. You will refrain from all public speaking and teaching - and from any act suggesting that it originates from the same source. Is that clearly understood?"

Once again, there was a locking of eyes. Peter responded bluntly.

"Is it right in God's eyes for us to obey you rather than God?"

He gestured to the man who had been healed and added:

"Judge for yourselves!"

John added with equal emphasis.

"We can't possibly give up speaking of the things we've seen and heard."

Caiaphas thundered, the high spots of colour again on his cheeks.

"You will refrain from speaking or teaching or acting in the name of Jesus of Nazareth!"

Peter and John stared back at him. Caiaphas knew they had the whip hand, the people were waiting on the outcome of the hearing and were glorifying God for all the things that had happened. He didn't dare to punish them, and for a moment it looked as if he would lose control. He turned aside and said over his shoulder.

"Release them!"

They left the temple, taking with them the man upon whom the miracle had been effected. He had been crippled from birth, and now he was over forty years old. They returned to the storehouse and were caught up in an outburst of relief that they had escaped punishment. They were required to sit down and tell what had been said and what had happened. When they were finished, Peter fell to his knees and they all followed suit. He clenched his large hands in prayer and lifted his face upward.

"Sovereign Lord, maker of heaven and earth and sea and of everything in them, who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of David thy servant, did say:

'Why did the Gentiles rage and the people lay their plots in vain? The kings of the earth took their stand and the rulers made common cause against the Lord and against his Messiah.'

They did indeed make common cause in this very city against your servant Jesus whom

you anointed as Messiah. Herod and Pontius Pilate conspired with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel to do all the things which, under your hand and decree, were foreordained. And now, O Lord, take notice of their threats, and enable your servants to speak your word in all boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and cause signs and wonders to be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

They ended their prayer, and while they were still kneeling, the building around them rocked, and they were filled anew with the Holy Spirit, and they proclaimed the word of God without fear.

As the days passed, it became a general practice for the believers to surrender their possessions for the common good. No one reserved anything for himself, they were united of one heart and soul. The Twelve continued with great eloquence and strength, to bear witness of the resurrection of Jesus.

In general, the population held them in high esteem, for they had never a needy person among them. Those who had property and land sold it, and brought the proceeds of the sale and placed the money at the disposal of the Twelve. It was then distributed to any who were in need.

Joseph bar Nabus - who had already provided the meeting place - sold an estate and brought the proceeds to be used for the common good. His name had a special meaning, that of ‘Son of Exhortation’, he was a Levite and by birth a Cypriot. Another man, by the name of Ananias, together with his wife, Sapphira, also sold a property. They discussed the matter between themselves.

“What does it matter if we keep some of the money for ourselves and give the rest.”

His wife was in full agreement.

Later that day, he presented the contribution to Peter. He was about to turn away when Peter said abruptly.

“Ananias! Tell me how is it that you’ve allowed Satan to get a grip on your mind so that you’ve lied to the Holy Spirit? Why have you kept back a part of the price of the land? Wh

ile you still owned it, wasn't it yours? When you turned it into money, wasn't it still yours? How could you think of doing what you've done? You've lied not to men - but you've lied to God!"

Ananias had been a follower for some time, and from the onset had been conspicuous for his eagerness to cheerfully do whatever had been asked on him. He was a large man, well into his middle age, and a complete contrast to his small wife, who reminded them all of a small bird who darted back and forth. She was always busy, as he had also been.

He gazed back at Peter, who stared into his eyes, and he could find no answer. The rest of the assembly was totally silent, and then, quite suddenly, Ananias clutched his chest and fell forward onto his face. Peter looked startled and knelt down beside him and turned him over, placing a hand over his heart. He said in a voice barely above a whisper.

"He's dead."

There was a murmur of awe among those assembled, and Peter knelt where he was in silent prayer. After a while, he gestured to some of the younger men.

"Cover him and take him outside - and bury him!"

They responded quickly and carried him away. Peter sat back against the wall and closed his eyes, when he opened them, the others of the Twelve were sitting around him in a semicircle. They were watching him solemnly. He found his voice.

"It wasn't my wish, brothers - I want the death of no man - but have no doubts, we have been given an awesome authority. The Master told us to loosen - but he also told us to bind - perhaps he has shown us what he meant - and it's still not finished! Remember, brothers - God is not mocked!"

Some three hours passed, and Sapphira, the wife of the dead man arrived, not aware of what had happened to her husband. Peter could see that the rest of the community found it hard to greet her. He took her aside.

“Tell me, Sapphira, were you paid this money for the land?”

He laid it out on the table in front of her. She darted a look at him like a bird, and then counted it. She looked back at him and stared him straight in the eyes.

“Yes, that was the amount.”

Peter responded quietly, the room was utterly still.

“Tell me, Sapphira, why did you conspire with Ananias to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Listen! There outside the door are the footsteps of those who have just buried your husband - and they’ll also carry you away!”

She jerked back and then dropped down at his feet. Peter stared down at her and the young men entered the room and one stooped over her. Not a word was spoken, they covered her, carried her out, and buried her beside her husband.

Peter stood alone, his head bent in sorrow, and a great awe fell over the whole assembly, and all those who subsequently heard of what had happened.

Later, when the storehouse was in darkness and the last murmuring conversations had died away, Peter lay on his back on his mattress and stared into the darkness.

Mariamne lay beside him, he knew she was as wakeful as himself. She said nothing, until finally, he whispered fiercely.

“I suppose you think I’m some sort of monster - like the rest of them!?”

“I don’t think you’re a monster - and neither do they!”

He digested it for a moment.

“I saw the way they looked at me.”

Her response was insistent as his.

“They looked at you with respect - as the one chosen by the Master. If they felt anything else, it was awe at the mighty power he’s given you.”

“What if you’re wrong, what if they think I’m some demon who can kill with a look!?”

There was a hint of suppressed laughter in her whispered response.

“You’ve been listening to old wive’s tales - or were you so out of hand as a child that

your mother had to threaten you with them?"

"This isn't a time for making jokes. I'll be feared by the community from this time on - you mark my words, Mariamne."

The humour was gone when she replied.

"Simon - they love and respect you - and if they're right thinking, they'll know that the Master used you - and will carry on using you for as long as he chooses. What happened with Ananias and Sapphira, was the result of their own conscience choking them - you didn't kill them with a look! The Master used you to show us all the error of what they did - and in so doing he showed you to be his chosen leader. It was always what he wanted - I could see it when he was with us."

Peter was silent for a few moments.

"Why me, Mariamne - why me?"

"Because you were the one he chose for the job! Now stop feeling sorry for yourself and get some sleep!"