

THE WORD SPREADS FROM JERUSALEM TO CAESAREA

ACTS 8:1 - 11:18

¹That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem,

and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.

²Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him.

³But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.

⁴Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word.

We recall Jesus' final words to the apostles:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

– Acts 1:8

To this point we have watched the power of the Holy Spirit working through the apostles and those chosen to assist them in their ministry, as they 'filled Jerusalem' (5:28) with the word which they proclaimed. We have also witnessed the way in which the religious authorities persecuted the apostles.

With the killing of Stephen the persecution intensifies, though now it seems that it is directed especially at the Greek-speaking Christians, led by the seven. From Stephen's speech (chapter seven) it would seem that it is the members of this group who were considered a direct threat to the leaders of the temple establishment.

Once again Paul is linked with Stephen. He not only approved of him being stoned (see 8:1), but he is singled out as being determined to wipe out the church which shared Stephen's faith. We recall Jesus' words:

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

– Luke 6:22

The seed of the word is scattered beyond Jerusalem, not because of a decision made by the Jerusalem community, but because of persecution. When Jesus was taken by God into heaven, the apostles had to await the Holy Spirit, for it is only the gift from Jesus of the Spirit that could give power to their actions and to their words. It is Jesus, mysteriously present through the power of his Spirit, who is continuing his mission through them.

So now they have had to wait on the same Spirit before moving beyond Jerusalem. Stephen could be killed, as could Jesus. The way he dies gives power to his witness, a power which will affect his persecutors (especially Saul), and which is seen in the 'proclaiming of the word from place to place'. God's glorifying of the suffering servant continues in Jesus' faithful disciples.

Philip (see 6:5) continues the ministry of Stephen, now reaching out beyond Jerusalem to ‘the city of Samaria’. Herod the Great renamed the city Sebaste in honour of the emperor Augustus (of which Sebaste is the Greek equivalent). It seems as though, not surprisingly, the ancient name continued in use. God’s liberating and saving word is not confined to Jerusalem and the temple. Jesus, through the ministry of his missionaries, encounters people wherever they are. In the Christian community Judea (Jerusalem) and Samaria, the southern and northern kingdoms, are reconciled. God’s chosen people are no longer divided as they had been since the death of Solomon (see 1Kings 12; see also Ezra 4). At last the hope and the promise of Jeremiah is being realised: ‘In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel’(Jeremiah 3:18). ‘At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people’(Jeremiah 31:1). The kingdom is being restored to Israel (see 1:6).

Philip’s word is confirmed by the same wonderful signs that are associated with the ministry of Jesus (see Luke 6:18). The people of Samaria ‘did not receive Jesus, because his face was set toward Jerusalem’(Luke 9:53). Now, however, they welcome Jesus’ envoy with ‘great joy’, like the joy that greeted Jesus’ birth (see Luke 1:14,44; 2:10); like the joy that greeted the finding of the lost sheep (Luke 15:6-7), the lost coin (Luke 15:9-10), and the lost son (Luke 15:32); like the joy that welled up in the hearts of Jesus’ disciples when the risen Jesus appeared to them (Luke 24:41), and promised to send them the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:52).

Luke wishes to make it perfectly clear that the power that is seen in the ministry of Philip is in no way to be confused with the kinds of power associated with the Samaritan magician, Simon. Simon represents the kind of idolatry found in the northern kingdom and frequently denounced by the prophets. Through belief and baptism, union is coming between Samaria and Judea. Philip is ‘proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus’, the Messiah.

⁵**Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. ⁶The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did,** ⁷**for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralysed or lame were cured. ⁸So there was great joy in that city.**

⁹**Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. ¹⁰All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, ‘This man is the power of God that is called Great.’ ¹¹And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.**

¹²**But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women. ¹³Even Simon himself believed. After being baptised, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.**

¹⁴Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit ¹⁶(for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus). ¹⁷Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹saying, 'Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.'

²⁰But Peter said to him, 'May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! ²¹You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God.

²²Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness.'

²⁴Simon answered, 'Pray for me to the Lord that nothing of what you have said may happen to me.'

²⁵Now after Peter and John had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans.

In Luke's Gospel, John the Baptist distinguishes between the baptism which he is giving – a 'baptism of repentance' (Luke 3:3), 'with water' (Luke 3:16) – and the baptism which Jesus will give 'with the Holy Spirit' (Luke 3:16). In his speech on the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaims:

Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

– Acts 2:38

With baptism comes the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. However, Luke is reminding us that baptism is not an external act which can be controlled in the way that Simon was able to work magic. It is about being welcomed into the community of the Church and discernment on the part of the Church is required. The Jerusalem community send Peter and John to Samaria and the Holy Spirit is received while the apostles pray and lay their hands upon the baptised.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is not a power that can be bought. This point is demonstrated in the encounter with Simon. Our hearts must be open to receive God's Spirit. God is love and love does not force entry into the human heart. It can be received only by one whose heart is open to welcome the offered gift.

Jesus promised that his heavenly Father would 'give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him' (Luke 11:13). The Holy Spirit came upon the apostles who were 'constantly devoting themselves to prayer' (1:14; see also 4:31). In this present scene, Peter and John pray for the coming of the Spirit, and their prayer is heard.

In recognising the authenticity of the conversion of the Samaritans, Peter represents the Jews, accepting into communion the peoples of the northern kingdom. According to the prophet Ezekiel, for God's people to turn away from sin and turn to the Lord, God would need to cleanse them with water and give them his Spirit:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you.

– Ezekiel 36:25-27

The people of Israel are first gathered together to form a body, and then God's Spirit breathes life into them:

Thus says the Lord God: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms ... and I will cleanse them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd ... I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them for evermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

– Ezekiel 37:21-27

Ezekiel is giving voice to the prophetic promise announced by the prophet Jeremiah:

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north ... He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock ... your children shall come back to their own country ... The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

– Jeremiah 31: 8,10, 17,31

The coming of the apostles from Jerusalem and their laying hands upon the recently baptised Samaritans is a statement of the reconciliation of Samaria and Judah. The manifest outpouring of the Holy Spirit in response to prayer is a statement by the risen Jesus that Samaria, like Jerusalem, is where God has chosen to make his dwelling. The Samaritans join the Jews as brothers and sisters, manifesting in their lives the power of the Spirit promised by the Father. Reconciled now with the Jewish Christians as part of a purified, reconciled and united Israel, they are able to carry out the mission of Israel, the mission of Jesus, 'to the ends of the earth' (1:8).

²⁶Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.)

²⁷So he got up and went.

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship
²⁸and was returning home;

seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’

³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’

³¹He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

In his speech to the Sanhedrin, Stephen demonstrated that a place is holy when it is made holy by the presence of God. Furthermore, God can be present wherever and whenever God chooses (see commentary on 7:49). The risen Jesus is manifestly pouring out his Holy Spirit wherever people are open to his word. We have just seen this demonstrated in Samaria. We now see it demonstrated in the chariot of an Ethiopian eunuch.

In his Pentecost speech, Peter stated that God’s promise of the Holy Spirit ‘is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him’ (2:39). The seven have been preaching the word to the Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem. Philip, having taken the word to Samaria, is now led by ‘an angel of the Lord’ and inspired by ‘the Spirit’ to take it to a Jew from the far away region beyond Egypt who is returning to his country. Israel, now united in the Christian community through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, reaches out through Philip to include all of Israel dispersed throughout the world. The prophecy of Jeremiah is being fulfilled: ‘The Lord brought the people of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them’ (Jeremiah 16:15).

Ezekiel saw the glory of God moving out from the temple in a chariot in order to be with the people in exile (see Ezekiel 11:22-23). The word of the glorified Jesus is spreading out along the many roads that connect Jerusalem with the world. The man is a foreigner. He is also a eunuch who cannot transmit life – another of those, like the lame man (see 3:2), excluded from the assembly (Deuteronomy 23:2; Leviticus 21:17-21). Listen, however, to the disciples of Isaiah:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’; and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree.’ For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who ... hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord ... and hold fast my covenant — these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

– Isaiah 56:3-7

We are reminded of Luke's account of the meeting between Jesus and the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They, too, needed to come to see the role of suffering in the life of God's Messiah: 'Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' (Luke 24:26). Jesus, mysteriously present with them as they journeyed along the road, 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets, interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures' (Luke 24:27). The disciples were delighted: 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' (Luke 24:32). Their experience culminated in 'the breaking of bread' when 'their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight' (Luke 24:31).

Now, mysteriously present in Philip, Jesus does the same for the eunuch. This scene, however, reaches its climax, not in the Eucharist, but in Baptism. The eunuch experiences a similar joy, and, like Jesus, Philip mysteriously vanishes.

Having journeyed north to the Samaritans, and having journeyed south to an Ethiopian Jew returning to his country, Philip reaches the coast and the port constructed by Herod the Great and named in honour of the emperor (Caesar) of Rome. Through this port Palestine is connected to the vast Roman Empire in which the word is about to be proclaimed.

³²Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: 'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.' ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.' [Isaiah 53:7-8]

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?'

³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptised?' ^[37]

³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptised him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

[³⁷] Some ancient manuscripts, including Irenaeus, AH 3.12.8, add:

And Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he replied, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'

¹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Luke has already introduced us to Saul. Those who took part in the stoning of Stephen ‘laid their coats at the feet of a young man called Saul’(7:58) who ‘approved of their killing him’(8:1). He also told us that ‘Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison’(8:3). The disciples who so enraged Saul are called here those ‘who belonged to the Way.’ The ‘way of the Lord’(Isaiah 40:3) as lived by Jesus’ followers, described in a summary way in 2:42-47 and 4:32-35, was sufficiently distinctive to set them apart from their Jewish brothers and sisters.

It was especially those who thought like Stephen who were persecuted and were scattered far and wide away from Jerusalem. Some had reached as far as Damascus, and so keen was Saul to wipe them out that he sought and obtained authorisation from the high priest to hunt them down ‘and bring them bound to Jerusalem.’

This picture of Saul is consistent with that given by Saul himself. To the Galatians, he writes that, being more zealous than the others for the traditions of his ancestors, he was ‘violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it’(Galatians 1:13-14). To the Christian community in Philippi he admits that he was ‘a persecutor of the church’ (Philippians 3:6). To his close friend Timothy, he describes his life at this time as that of one who was not only a ‘persecutor’, but also ‘a man of violence’. He continues: ‘But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus’(1Timothy 1:13-14).

Luke is about to describe God’s mercy to Paul and the call which Paul himself speaks of in his letters: ‘God was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles’(Galatians 1:15-16). ‘He appeared also to me’(1Corinthians 15:8). ‘Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?’(1Corinthians 9:1).

Saul is suddenly surrounded by ‘light from heaven’ which causes him to fall to the ground. This is biblical language for a divine visitation. The prophet Ezekiel writes:

Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendour all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking.

– Ezekiel 1:28

Saul has a vision of the glorified Jesus (see 9:27) who calls him by name. The repetition of the name reminds us of the call of Abraham, of Jacob and of Moses. They are all called for a mission, as is Saul:

The angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’

– Genesis 22:11

God spoke to Israel in visions of the night, and said, ‘Jacob, Jacob.’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’

– Genesis 46:2

God called to Moses out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’

– Exodus 3:4

Like Moses before him (see Exodus 6:9), Saul asks who it is who is calling him. The response includes the divine ‘I am’ (Greek: egō eimi, Exodus 3:14), identified now with Jesus. Saul has met Jesus in Stephen and in those ‘who belonged to the Way’ (9:2), but he has failed to recognise in them the presence of the Living One, his Lord and Saviour. Like the others who rejected Jesus and were now persecuting Jesus’ disciples, Saul was confident that he could see. Now he knows that he is blind and must be led by others. His journey of repentance has begun. We recall the words of Isaiah:

I will lead the blind by a road they do not know ... I will turn the darkness before them into light ... Who is blind but my servant, or deaf like my messenger whom I send? Who is blind ... like the servant of the Lord?

– Isaiah 42:16,19

The servant in Isaiah represents the people of God who are blind. If they are to see they must await a miracle of grace, for only God can bring them to conversion. As we watch Saul, we are watching the grace which the Lord is offering those in Israel who are resisting his Spirit.

³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’

⁵He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’

The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

‘But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’

‘The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.

⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.

⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ He answered, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ ¹¹The Lord said to him, ‘Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.’

¹³But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.’

¹⁵But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel;

¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’

¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’

¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptised, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

The divine initiative brings together the persecutor and the persecuted. It is the latter ('the poor') who is the instrument of 'the Lord' in reaching out to the former. Ananias's response echoes that of God's faithful servants, noted on the previous page: 'Here I am.' Saul is 'praying' and God is preparing him for Ananias's coming.

Like Moses (see Exodus 3:13; 4:1) and Isaiah (Isaiah 6:4), Ananias is reluctant. He is reassured when he is told of the vocation for which the Lord has chosen Saul: to witness to Jesus 'before the Gentiles and before the people of Israel'. This choice is based solely on God's gracious love, as Saul himself stresses:

God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.

– Galatians 1:15-16

I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am.

– 1Corinthians 15:9-10

Saul will suffer, as will everyone who is called to give up all his possessions (see Luke 14:33). He has to let go his past certainties. He has to let go the way he has confined the divine within the sectarian bounds of the Judaism which he had learned. He has to face how seriously wrong he has been, and become part of a Way that he has disparaged and persecuted. On top of the demands of his personal conversion, there is the opposition he will meet from those of his former allies who are unwilling to repent.

Ananias greets Saul as his 'brother' and lays hands on him in a gesture of communion (see 6:8; 8:17). Saul is enlightened, baptised and filled with the Holy Spirit. Is Luke referring to the Eucharist when he speaks of the food which gives Saul strength?

Saul begins witnessing to Jesus in the synagogues where ‘he confounded the Jews by proving that Jesus was the Messiah’, the ‘Son of God’(compare 13:33). The Jews to whom Saul spoke would have understood this latter as a Messianic title. God promised David: ‘I will raise up your offspring after you … I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me’(2Samuel 7:12,14). When the Davidic prince ascended the throne, the following words were chanted: ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’(Psalm 2:7). In another psalm we hear:

I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him, and my covenant with him will stand firm.

– Psalm 89:27-28

The title ‘Son of God’, as with all other Messianic titles, takes on special depths of meaning when it is used of Jesus by Christians. This was the title given Jesus when his conception was announced to Mary (see Luke 1:35). The question addressed to Jesus by the Sanhedrin at his trial was phrased also in this way (see Luke 22:70). Saul himself describes his conversion when ‘God revealed his Son to me’(Galatians 1:16), and to the Romans he introduces himself as:

a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God … the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,

– Romans 1:1-4

^{19b}For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus,
²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’

²¹All who heard him were amazed and said, ‘Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?’

²²Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

Paul escapes from Damascus

²³After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, ²⁴but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; ²⁵but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

Initially bewildered, as was Ananias (9:13-14), the Jews turn hostile, and Saul's suffering begins (see 9:16). They plot to kill him and he is forced to escape. He mentions this escape when writing later to the Corinthians:

In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.

– 2Corinthians 11:32-33

Some have tried to use this event to establish a date for Paul's escape and so for his conversion three years earlier. We know that King Aretas IV died in 39/40AD, so Paul's escape must have been before that. Some say that Aretas could not have exercised control over Damascus before the death of the emperor Tiberius in 37. The time-frame we are suggesting places Paul's escape in 37. Others suggest Aretus may have been in control some years before this. They note, as perhaps being relevant, that we have discovered no Roman coins minted in Damascus between 34 and the death of Aretas. All we can conclude is that some time prior to 39, Paul escaped from Damascus. There is nothing to stop some Jews being in on the plot, as mentioned by Luke. This was Paul's first visit to Jerusalem since he left the city to bring back Christians as prisoners (see Galatians 1:18).

Paul tells us that three years passed between his conversion and his visit to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:18). He also states that the only apostles whom he met while in Jerusalem were Cephas (Peter) and ‘James, the Lord’s brother’ (see Galatians 1:18-19). The latter, while not one of the twelve, had a leadership role among the elders in the Jerusalem church. Paul is stressing how little contact he had with the apostles. Luke wants to highlight the fact that the apostles recognised Paul’s conversion as they had that of the Samaritans (see 9:27), and that his witness in Jerusalem was in harmony with theirs.

Barnabas (see 4:36-37) reassures the Jerusalem community concerning Saul. Twice in this passage Luke presents Saul as speaking ‘boldly in the name of Jesus/the Lord’. The word ‘boldly’ is used by Saul himself when he refers to the way in which he carries out his ministry (see 1 Thessalonians 2:2; 2Corinthians 3:12; Ephesians 3:12; 6:19-20). Luke is telling us that Saul is speaking from the fullness of the Spirit that is upon him, which gives him the same courage that the apostles experienced at Pentecost (see 2:29; 4:13,29,31). In Jerusalem, Saul speaks about Jesus without fear or compromise, and with the same power that was obvious in Damascus (see 9:22). As he himself states, this is not from his own strength:

By the grace of God I am what I am.

– 1Corinthians 15:9

I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

– Philippians 4:13

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

– Ephesians 6:10

The Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.

– 2Timothy 4:17

Saul comes up against Greek-speaking Jews, the same people who had martyred Stephen (see 6:9). To save him from the same fate, the community send him off to Tarsus, his city of origin (see 9:11).

²⁶When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.

²⁷But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.

²⁸So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

²⁹He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him.

³⁰When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

**³¹Meanwhile
the church
throughout Ju-
dea, Galilee, and
Samaria**

**had peace and
was built up.**

**Living in the
fear of the
Lord and in the
comfort ['con-
solation'] of the
Holy Spirit,
it increased in
numbers.**

Luke first spoke of the Christian community as a ‘church’ (Greek: *ekklēsia*) after narrating the sin of Ananias and Sapphira (5:11). He used the same word to describe the ‘*congregation* in the wilderness’ at the time of Moses (7:38). He spoke of the church again when the persecution broke out in Jerusalem (8:1,3). Stephen declared that it was not for us to build God’s house: God is the builder (see 7:47,49). In this summary statement, Luke shows us how God , through the Spirit of the glorified Jesus, is building up the church throughout the whole of Israel.

The ‘peace’ to which Luke refers is not, as we have seen and will see again, a peace *from* persecution, but a peace *in the midst of* persecution. It is the Messianic peace for which Zechariah prayed (Luke 1:79), the peace experienced by those who are graced by God (Luke 2:14). This peace is the fruit of faith (Luke 7:50, 8:48) which is offered by Jesus’ missionaries (Luke 10:5-6), and is the gift of the risen Christ (Luke 24:36).

The expression ‘the fear of the Lord’ occurs only twice in the New Testament, here and in Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians 5:11. The psalmist identifies those who fear the Lord as those who ‘hope in his love’ (Psalm 33:18). The Book of Proverbs speaks of the fear of the Lord as being the opposite of pride and arrogance (Proverbs 8:13); as consisting in ‘knowledge of the Holy One’ – knowing that God is the creator and sustainer of life, the redeemer and saviour (Proverbs 9:10). Fear of the Lord results in a commitment to seek and to carry out God’s will, knowing that all our hope is in God, the ‘fountain of life’ (Proverbs 14:27). Isaiah speaks of the fear of the Lord as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 11:3), and writes: ‘The fear of the Lord is Zion’s treasure’ (Isaiah 33:6).

The community was living not only in the ‘fear of the Lord’ but in the ‘consolation of the Holy Spirit’. At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke introduced Simeon as a symbol of all who were ‘looking forward to the consolation (Greek: *paraklēsis*) of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him’ (Luke 2:25). We recall the opening words of the prophet of the exile as he looked forward to the return to the promised land: ‘Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God’ (Isaiah 40:1). Barnabas, who convinced the community to welcome Paul, was given that name because he exemplified so well this grace of the Spirit (see 4:36).

We have just witnessed the risen Christ effecting a radical change in the life of Saul, the persecutor. We are about to witness a radical change taking place in the life of Peter, the leader of the apostles. The first step in this conversion is when Peter begins to move beyond Jerusalem. It is this movement and the powerful ways in which his mission is blessed that open the way for the mission to the Gentiles.

The believers living in Lydda are called ‘saints’ – a term already used by Ananias when referring to the believers in Jerusalem (9:13). They are saints ('holy') because the ‘Holy One’(2:27) dwells among them, and because it is his Holy Spirit (9:31) that binds them together, as they share in the life enjoyed by the glorious risen Lord.

In his gospel Luke records a scene in which Jesus encounters a paralysed man, and says to him: ‘I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.’ Luke continues: ‘Immediately he stood up’(Luke 5:24-25). As Peter explicitly states, and as the residents of Lydda and Sharon recognise, Jesus is carrying on his healing ministry through Peter. In the Gospel and here in Acts the words ‘stand up’(Greek: egeirō, Luke 5:24) and ‘get up’(Greek: anistēmi, 9:34; see 9:6) are used in relation to the resurrection. The healing is a sign of the power of the risen Jesus to give eternal life, the life that death cannot take away because it is a sharing in the very life of God.

³²Now as Peter went here and there among all the believers, he came down also to the saints living in Lydda.

³³There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years, for he was paralysed.

³⁴Peter said to him, ‘Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed!’

And immediately he got up.

³⁵And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

³⁶Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.

³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, 'Please come to us without delay.'

³⁹So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.

⁴⁰Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up.' Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up.

⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.

⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

⁴³Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

The previous scene involved a man. Luke balances this, as he does a number of times in his Gospel, with a scene involving a woman. The life-giving power of the risen Jesus working through his disciples is demonstrated even more powerfully here. We read in the Gospel of Luke how Jesus met a widow whose only son had died.

When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.' Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

– Luke 7:13-15

Luke recounts also how Jairus, described as 'a leader of the synagogue' begged Jesus to come to the aid of his only daughter who was dying. While Jesus was still on his way, news came that she had died. Jesus replied: 'Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved' (Luke 8:50). On arriving at the house:

Jesus took her by the hand and called out, 'Child, get up!' Her spirit returned, and she got up at once. Then he directed them to give her something to eat.

– Luke 8:54-55

Behind these scenes as described by Luke stand the biblical legends about the great prophets Elijah and Elisha (see 1Kings 17:17-24 and 2Kings 4:18-37).

Death was unable to conquer Jesus. Now, raised by his Father to life-beyond-death, he who is 'the "initiator of life" (2:28) continues his life-giving ministry through Peter. We are too far away from any of these events to be able to make an accurate statement of the exact medical condition of those involved. We do know how things appeared at the time, and that these events have been included to demonstrate that not even death can 'separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8:38-39). As the song of Zechariah states:

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

– Luke 1:78-79

Cornelius is a centurion stationed in Caesarea. He is described as ‘a devout man who feared God’ (compare 9:31). This soldier is a Gentile, but one who is devoted to the God of Israel without accepting circumcision. His devotion is demonstrated by his giving of alms. We are reminded of the centurion in Luke’s Gospel of whom the Jewish elders say: ‘he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us’ (Luke 7:5). Besides almsgiving, Cornelius prayed constantly to God (the Western text also mentions ‘fasting’). In the book of Tobit we read:

Prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness ... For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life.

– Tobit 12:8-9

He is praying at the time of the evening prayer and sacrifice in the temple (see 3:1). It is also the hour of Jesus’ death when a centurion, impressed by the way Jesus had died praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent’ (Luke 23:47). In his prayer Cornelius has a vision. God assures him that he has accepted his prayer as a sacrifice (see Isaiah 56:6-7). His reaction reminds us of that of the women at the tomb when they received a divine visitation (see Luke 24:5), and of the apostles when the risen Jesus appeared to them (see Luke 24:37).

For the first time in *Acts*, Luke refers to Peter as ‘Simon, who is called Peter’. There is an echo here of the scene in the Gospel where Jesus and Peter are together in Peter’s boat. There is a miraculous catch of fish and Jesus says to ‘Simon Peter’: ‘from now on you will be catching people’ (Luke 5:10). There is a play here on the Greek zōgreō which can mean ‘catching alive’ or ‘restoring to life’. We are about to see an example of this.

¹In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called.

²He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.

³One afternoon at about three o’clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, ‘Cornelius.’

⁴He stared at him in terror and said, ‘What is it, Lord?’

He answered, ‘Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.

⁵Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ‘he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.’

When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, ⁸and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

⁹About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.

¹⁰He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance.

¹¹He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners.

¹²In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air.

¹³Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.'

¹⁴But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.'

¹⁵The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Already we have seen Ananias and Saul being recipients of interconnected visions (see 9:10-12). Cornelius has just had a vision which caused him to dispatch some men to meet up with Peter. Now, before their arrival, Peter has a vision which prepares him to meet them. He is told by the Lord to kill and eat creatures that are profane [Greek: *koinos*], unclean [Greek: *akathartos*].

To this point the word 'unclean' has been used only of 'unclean spirits' (5:16; 8:7), which is also the only way Luke uses it in his Gospel. To understand the category 'unclean' we need to go back to the ancient regulations forbidding contact with foods such as some of those named in this vision (see Leviticus 11).

You are a people holy to the Lord your God; it is you the Lord has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. You shall not eat any abhorrent thing.

— Deuteronomy 14:2-3

Also forbidden was contact with certain objects, for example a corpse (Numbers 5:2) and certain people, for example, lepers (Leviticus 13:45), and women at the time of menstruation (Leviticus 15:19) and childbirth (Leviticus 12:2-5). The purpose of the cleanliness laws was to keep reminding the people of Israel that they have been set aside by the Holy One, and that they must not do anything that would compromise or contaminate what is sacred. This was especially important in the regulations concerning women, for blood was deemed sacred.

A person who broke these ancient taboos was declared 'unclean' and had to be cut off from social contact. It was especially important that they not contaminate places deemed holy because of God's presence. The separation of what is 'holy' from what is 'unclean' led to lands other than Israel being called 'unclean' (Amos 7:17). The same held for their inhabitants, the Gentiles (Isaiah 35:8; 52:1).

Peter treats the vision as a temptation, but it persists (the significance of the 'three times'). God keeps insisting that communion with something declared pure by God (even things named in the law as unclean) cannot compromise holiness, since God, by declaring something clean is guaranteeing that the purpose of the law is not being compromised. Peter can 'kill and eat' without disobeying God when God invites him to do so.

Peter is still ‘puzzling about what to make of the vision that he had seen’, when the emissaries from Cornelius arrive. He is directed by the Spirit to meet them and to go with them ‘for I have sent them’. They tell him about Cornelius, and Peter’s vision begins to make sense. In obedience to the Spirit, Peter takes a first step in going beyond the limits imposed by the law. He welcomes Gentiles, hitherto considered ‘unclean’. He invites them in, gives them lodging, and leaves with them for Caesarea.

He does not go alone: ‘some believers from Joppa accompanied him’. Other Jewish Christians (the Greek is *adelphoi*: ‘brothers’, see 1:15), following Peter and trusting in the inspiration of the Spirit, are willing to forgo practices which hitherto they had considered commanded by God. God, the author of the law, is drawing them beyond the law. Like Abraham, in obedience to the Spirit, they are willing to ‘leave’ what they have thought sacred and ‘go to the land that I will show you’(7:3).

¹⁷Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon’s house and were standing by the gate.

¹⁸They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there.

¹⁹While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Look, three men are searching for you. ²⁰Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.’

²¹So Peter went down to the men and said, ‘I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?’

²²They answered, ‘Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.’

²³So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him.

²⁴The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshipped him.
²⁶But Peter made him get up, saying, 'Stand up; I am only a mortal.'

²⁷And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; ²⁸and he said to them, 'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. ²⁹So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?'

³⁰Cornelius replied, 'Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me.

³¹He said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.

³²Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' ³³Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come.

So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.'

Cornelius and his 'relatives and close friends' symbolise all those who are not from Israel but who 'in the presence of God' welcome the emissaries of Jesus 'to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.'

Encouraged by his vision, Cornelius treats Peter with the respect owed to a god. Peter instructs him not to act in this way. Peter is God's emissary. Peter recounts his vision (see 10:9-16), to explain why he is not following the law as it applies to Jews associating with Gentiles. He is not acting against the law; he is acting in obedience to the law-giver (see 10:15).

Cornelius responds by recounting his vision (see 10:3-7). This time the one spoken of earlier as an 'angel of God' (10:3) is described as 'a man in dazzling clothes' (compare 1:10; Luke 24:4). In his commentary, the Venerable Bede reminds us that 'three o'clock' (that is, 'the ninth hour'), the hour when Cornelius was praying was 'the time at which the Lord himself was praying, with his hands stretched out upon the cross for the salvation of the whole world'.

We have here an example of Christian catechesis in relation to those who are not accustomed to looking to the Hebrew Scriptures as an authority. Though what Peter says here can be supported from the scriptures, he does not quote from them.

Cornelius would have experienced the practice of victorious rulers demonstrating their power by arbitrarily sparing some prisoners while having others put to death. Peter's first point is that God who has sent him to Cornelius is not like that. God does not arbitrarily favour some and not others (see Deuteronomy 10:17; Romans 2:11). Cornelius has been described by his emissaries as 'an upright and God-fearing man' (10:22). Peter assures him that he is acceptable to God. Through his association with Judaism as a 'God-fearer' (see 10:2), Cornelius would know of God's promise of peace:

The mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

— Isaiah 54:10

The notion 'peace' is a rich one, denoting prosperity (see Isaiah 48:18) and harmony in every aspect of life:

I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase.

— Ezekiel 34:25-27

It would be the task of God's Messiah to achieve this peace, and Peter declares to Cornelius that Jesus is the Messiah:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'

— Isaiah 52:7

Along with this focus on 'peace' is Peter's statement that Jesus is 'Lord of all':

The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

— Isaiah 52:12

³⁴Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality,³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.'

³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ — he is Lord of all.

³⁷That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:

³⁸how 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.

³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;

⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not 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.

⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.

Peter sums up Jesus' public ministry, and practically the whole of his Gospel, when he tells Cornelius that: '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'.

'He went about doing good'. One thinks of the gentle scene with the widow of Nain (see Luke 7:11-17), and the way in which he related so sensitively with the sinful woman at the banquet (see Luke 7:36-50). One thinks of the blind man of Jericho (see Luke 18:35-43), and the man who was crucified with Jesus (see Luke 23:39-43). One thinks of Jesus' teaching about forgiveness (see Luke 17:4), and about love that remains constant in a violent environment (see Luke 6:27-36). One thinks of Jesus' stories about the caring Samaritan (see Luke 10:29-37), the lost sheep (see Luke 15:4-7), and the boy that was welcomed home (see Luke 15:11-24). In a way that is special even among the Gospels, Luke portrays Jesus as one whose heart goes out to the poor, the downcast, the rejected. He took their side and refused to stop caring even when his commitment to them cost him his life. This was true of Jesus' ministry up to his death. In *Acts*, Luke shows us Jesus continuing his 'doing good' through his disciples.

'Healing all who were oppressed by the devil'. Luke portrays Jesus not only as a life-giver, the 'Initiator of life'(3:15), but also, as we have seen, as 'Saviour'(see commentary on 4:12) and liberator. Those who experienced the gift of life from Jesus experienced it as a release. Prior to their encounter with Jesus, and in different ways, they were distracted, caught up, trapped and imprisoned in physical, psychic and spiritual ways which were anything but life-giving and from which they were unable to break free. A new way of looking at life was needed: a new mind, a new heart, a new spirit. It was Jesus who taught them to repent and whose love made this repentance possible. It was Jesus who brought them 'the message of salvation'(13:26). It was his love that enabled them to hear it and to embrace the freedom which he offered (see Luke 4:35,41; 6:18; 8:2,26-39; 9:37-43; 11:1). This ministry of conquering evil continues with even greater power, through the apostles over whom he has poured his Spirit (5:1-11; 8:9-2; 13:4-12; 16:16-18; 19:11-20; 28:1-6).

'God was with him'. This is the heart of it all. It was the love of the Father and the gift of the Holy Spirit that brought about Jesus' conception. The source of Jesus' healing love and of his power over evil was his communion with his Father. We see this when Jesus is found by his parents in the temple, aged twelve: 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house' (Luke 2:49). It was an overwhelming experience of love that set him on the path of ministry; 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Luke 3:22). It was this love that enabled him to withstand the temptations that he faced in the wilderness (see Luke 4:1-13). During his ministry, as Luke reminds us, Jesus is constantly in prayer (see, for example, Luke 5:16; 6:12):

Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'

– Luke 10:21-22

Throughout *Acts*, Luke continually relates Jesus to God, for it is God who is being revealed as we watch and listen to what Jesus is saying and doing through his witnesses. We are reminded that it is God who raised up Jesus as our Saviour (see 13:23; 3:22). It is God who consecrated him with his Holy Spirit (see 4:27; 10:38). It is God who announced peace through him (see 10:36) and worked wonders through him (see 2:22). It is God's providence that encompassed even Jesus' death as an instrument of salvation (see 2:23; 3:18; 4:28). It is God who raised Jesus from the dead (see 2:24,32; 3:15,26; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30,33; 17:31). It is God who caused Jesus to appear to his disciples (see 10:40), who raised him to glory (see 2:33; 5:31), who gave him the Holy Spirit (see 2:33; 5:32) and who glorifies Jesus in his disciples (see 3:13; 4:30). It is God who established Jesus as judge (see 10:42; 17:31) and who will send him again at the parousia (see 3:20). It is God who guides the whole universe through him (see 17:31).

When people like Cornelius found themselves being attracted to Jesus, they found themselves attracted to God, and God's love became effective in their lives. The liberation which they experienced reached right down to the depths of their being, giving them religious freedom and a profound sense of meaning in their lives. Jesus became the 'Lord and Saviour'.

Peter goes on to speak of Jesus' death. He then tells the Gentile group that God raised Jesus to life. Those chosen by God can witness to this, for they 'ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead' (see 1:4; Luke 24:30,42). The risen Lord is more powerful than Caesar. Caesar has power of judgment over the living. The risen Jesus is 'the one ordained ['hand-picked beforehand'] by God as judge of the living and the dead'. Paul writes: 'To this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living' (Romans 14:9). 'Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead' (2 Timothy 4:1).

⁴³All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.

⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,

⁴⁶for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

Then Peter said, ⁴⁷'Can anyone withhold the water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'

⁴⁸So he ordered them to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.

Then they invited him to stay for several days.

We recall Peter's words to the Jewish crowd on the day of Pentecost:

Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

– Acts 2:38

He declared to the Sanhedrin:

God exalted Jesus at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

– Acts 5:31

Peter has spoken of God as not showing partiality. God accepts anyone who recognises dependence upon God, is open to grace, and acts in accordance with God's will (see 10:34-35). Peter now declares that 'everyone who believes in Jesus' (see 3:16) receives this forgiveness.

In the vision which Peter received, God had said: 'what God has made clean, you must not call profane' (10:15). Now, to confirm for the Gentiles the truth of Peter's words, and to demonstrate for Peter and his circumcised (Jewish) companions that God is 'making clean' Cornelius and the others with God's own purifying fire, the Holy Spirit is poured out over the Gentiles. Peter recognises that their experience is the same as that of the apostles at Pentecost (see 2:4; compare 4:3; 8:17).

He therefore gives orders that the Gentiles be welcomed into the community of believers through baptism. Once again, as in the case of the first Samaritan converts (see 8:16), we see that, though baptism in the name of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit are intimately connected, they are not the same. Baptism is something we can do. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit comes from the mysterious freedom of God. It has been promised, and we can be confident that this gift is being offered 'to all who believe'. We must, however, wait for this gift in prayer, and never cease being amazed when it is given.

The apostles had received from Jesus the commission to witness to him ‘to the ends of the earth’(1:8). When they and the other Jewish Christians hear what happened in Caesarea, they criticise Peter, not because Gentiles, like the Samaritans (see 8:14) ‘had accepted the word of God’, but because Peter had gone to those who were uncircumcised and had eaten with them. Included in this objection is his having baptised the Gentiles without demanding circumcision, for baptism is a rite of initiation into the community, a welcoming into communion and so to breaking bread together. How can Jewish-Christians eat with the uncircumcised?

Peter recounts the vision which he had in Joppa (see 10:9-16), the arrival of the three men from Caesarea (see 10:17-18) and the instruction given him by the Spirit to ‘go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us’(see 10:19-20).

Peter tells them that, in obedience to the directions of the Spirit, he, with six others, entered the house of the Gentile. The number seven reminds us of the seven who were set aside to care for the Greek-speaking Christians in Jerusalem (see 6:3).

He recounts the instruction given by ‘the angel’ to Cornelius (see 10:5-6), an instruction that was for the salvation of his entire household. We recall the words from the prophet Joel with which Peter began his Pentecost discourse: ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’ (2:21).

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him,³ saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’

⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵‘I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’

¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.

¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.'

¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?

¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'

This is the crux of Peter's explanation. Believing the same word and sharing communion in a common meal have been intimately connected since the beginning. Peter reminds the other apostles of the words of Jesus promising the Holy Spirit. These words were spoken while they were sharing a meal (see 1:4-5). We observed the connection in the ministry of the seven between serving at table and proclaiming the word with the power of the Holy Spirit (see 6:2,10). It is also after telling Cornelius how he and the others had eaten with Jesus after his resurrection, that Peter went on to proclaim the word and to welcome Cornelius to table fellowship (see 10:41-43).

Since God has manifested his will by giving to the Gentiles the gift of the Holy Spirit (see 10:44-46), 'just as it fell upon us at the beginning' (see 2:4), how can they object to eating with them (see 11:3)? 'God gave them the same gift that he gave us'.

It is not being circumcised that is essential for receiving the Holy Spirit, it is believing in 'the Lord Jesus Christ'. This solemn credal formula appears only here and in the final verse of Acts (28:31). Jesus is the Messiah (see 2:38; 3:6; 4:10; 8:12; 9:34; 10:36; 10:48): the one in whom are fulfilled all the promises made to David; the one through whom the reign of God is to reach to the ends of the earth. He is the Lord (see 1:21; 4:33; 7:59; 8:16; 9:17): the one through whom comes God's salvation.

The Jewish Christians are satisfied with Peter's explanation and they 'praise God'. Repentance is a gift from God, and God has clearly given this gift to the Gentiles. Those who, like Cornelius, welcome this gift are declared pure by God, and so the commandments of the law relating to the avoidance of what is unclean do not apply to them. The 'Lord of the Sabbath' (Luke 6:5) is Lord also of regulations of the Torah. The 'Initiator of life' (3:15) has given to the Gentiles a share in his own divine life by pouring out upon them the gift of his Holy Spirit. It is for the community of the Lord's disciples to welcome them as brothers and sisters.