

Three Converts and one ‘Maybe’

Luke 5 v 12 – 16, 6 v 31 – 38, 7 v 1 – 10, 7 v 36 – 50

People who come to church regularly often have a favourite pew. Perhaps their family has sat there for generations or maybe it’s just where they feel most comfortable.

Imagine coming to the service some Sunday and finding in your favourite pew three unexpected visitors, a homeless man, a foreigner and a local woman with a bad reputation.

Our initial response might be to think, ‘Well if that’s the kind of people that new preacher is attracting I want no part of it’. And we have a choice – we can shoo these people out of our pew and our nice church building and get rid of the new preacher while we’re at it – or we can humbly acknowledge that in fundamental ways we’re all much the same and all of us need what the new preacher is talking about.

From our Bible readings today let me introduce you to the leper, the centurion and the woman described as having ‘lived a sinful life’, and a religious man who has a decision to make. I’ve called this sermon ‘Three converts and one maybe’.

Leprosy is a horrible disease and the man described by Luke in ch 5 was an advanced case, disfigured and frightening to look at. People could sometimes interpret the blessings and curses listed in Deuteronomy 28 in a harsh, black and white way and consider this man cursed by God for some dreadful sin of disobedience. That, and the obvious risk of infection meant he was classified as ‘unclean’ and barred from the Temple, public places, even his own home.

This man may have been a fine husband, father and a good workman at one time but this anti-social disease had rendered him a homeless outcast.

Until Jesus Son of God reached out and touched him, cured him, cleansed him! Now, after being officially declared ‘clean’ by the priest (who in those days acted as a kind of public health inspector) this man can go home, can be reunited to his family, find a job and attend worship.

Beside him there’s a foreign man, an officer in the Roman army. Anywhere centurions are mentioned in the NT they always seem to be men of integrity and good character. This man was no exception, making every effort to show respect and kindness to the people among whom he was living as one of the

‘occupying forces’. This man cared when his servant became seriously ill and was not above asking a local Jewish healer for help. The God of Israel he had come to revere answered his request through Jesus the Christ and the servant was healed.

Now this man from a different country and background has come to worship and give thanks. We’re not told if he converted to Judaism but he appears to be a firm believer in Jesus.

Now what about this woman? She turned up at a dinner party hosted by a religious man, one of the Pharisees. Somehow she slipped in and at one point got close enough to Jesus to express an extravagant and emotional act of devotion. The host was embarrassed and upset because everyone in the town knew this woman had a bad reputation. We’re not told exactly what it was. Some think she may have been a prostitute. It’s worth noting that often prostitutes are themselves victims of the men who control or use them. In many cases theirs is the greater sin!

Jesus accepted this woman and her penitent gift. He allowed her to show her gratitude and love and more, He assured her that her sins were forgiven and she was now free to live in peace with His blessing. Thus comforted, life and hope renewed, this woman has joined the company of those following Jesus.

Taking these accounts together, let’s observe three lessons today. First of all, let’s note the key element of humble faith.

All three of these people have recognised they are unable to solve their problems themselves. Each of them is helpless in some way and they know it. The leper cannot cleanse himself, the centurion cannot prevent his servant from dying, the woman cannot erase her guilty past. They can only seek the mercy of the Saviour of the world.

‘If you are willing, you can make me clean’, declares the leper.

‘Just say the word and my servant will be well’, professes the centurion.

‘Your faith has saved you’, says Jesus to the sinful woman.

For our part, faith in Jesus is the key element. This is greatly encouraged when we witness secondly the grace of the Saviour.

‘I *am* willing’, declares Jesus as He heals the leper, indignant that anyone might suggest otherwise. It appears to be His delight to cleanse and restore people who’ve been blighted and alienated. He commends the gentile army officer for

showing greater faith than His fellow Jews. And He welcomes the woman nobody else wants to know.

See how Jesus touches, praises and speaks kind words to these people. He faithfully preaches to the crowds, challenging us about sin and our need of repentance, but He welcomes individual sinners with wonderful grace and kindness.

This leaves us thirdly with several happy endings and a question mark, at least one!

The ex-leper has returned home and is spreading the news about Jesus. The centurion's household has been visited by God's grace with a fresh measure of health and strength. The woman is showing love in a new honourable way in gratitude for the liberating assurance of forgiveness.

Three converts and one 'maybe'. Here's the question mark. What about Simon the Pharisee who had included Jesus among his dinner guests? Jesus accepted hospitality from both tax-collectors and Pharisees, those deemed to have sinned seriously and frequently and those who at least outwardly lived respectable, religious lives.

This man attended worship, prayed, paid his tithes and offerings, tried to live by the rules. He probably even had a favourite pew in the synagogue! But would he be able to see that spiritually before a holy God *all* human beings are unclean with sin, dying guilty and without hope? Would he accept his need for cleansing, new life and forgiveness and humbly put his faith in Jesus? Would he subsequently demonstrate his faith by accepting people like these three as brothers and sisters sharing in the compassion of Christ?

We don't know. We're not told.

We only know our own hearts. Are we converts or maybes? Convinced committed believers and followers of Jesus or something else?

What does the Lord see when He looks in your pew today?