

Sermon for Sunday 2 June 2024 (Evensong)

Pete Postle, Reader

Psalm 35.1-10; Jeremiah 5.1-19; Luke 7.1-10

May all I say be always acceptable to thee, O Lord, my Rock, and my Saviour. Amen.

About eight years ago, a chap called Paul joined us, and said that he rather hoped that there'd be testimonies from people from time to time. I haven't heard any, so I thought you'd get one tonight, so sorry about that, it's about me. When I took early retirement from my teaching career, Elaine and I decided to move back to the west country, where I'd spent half of that career. We looked for a building project for me and ended up buying a barn to convert. Elaine was more than a little worried by this idea of building because I suffered from severe back spasms. Within the week of arriving, we started going to church at St. Martin's in the little village of Sherford, near Kingsbridge.

Now, let me introduce you to the retired Group Captain Jack, known to his friends as Benny Goodman. DFC and Bar, AFC, 78 missions in World War II. Interestingly, since it's this week, his very last mission was to knock out, that is, bomb, a very large gun battery sighted behind one of the D-day beaches. Just one day before that invasion. When we met Benny, it was with him as a retiring churchwarden, together with the assistant priest, the Reverend Cyril Tiquet. We got talking about my back trouble, and Cyril said that I could be offered healing. Benny said, 'Yes, we're rather good at backs', and laughed. Cyril, who was a rather formal chap when it came to such serious matters as the healing ministry, gave Benny a rather old-fashioned look and reminded him and me that healing powers were a gift of God, and belief in healing depended on the faith of healer and of the healed. Since then, I've reflected on how Jesus sent out 70 of his followers with instructions to preach and heal. Now, they came back delighted that their faith had given them that ability. A little later then, I found myself kneeling at the altar rail in St Martin's, and with Benny's hands on the small of my back, there was this wonderful penetrating warmth. Silently, I spoke to God. I remember my words exactly, probably because they weren't particularly elegant; 'Well, God, if this works, it's going to be a turn up for the book. I'm going to owe you a lot of my time.'

Well, you guessed. Slowly, but surely, the spasms grew weaker and less frequent and were gone in about three months. I started to think how about I could fulfil my promise to God. I didn't know what I could do, but volunteered, or rather, that is, Benny asked Elaine, to be a churchwarden at Sherford, just while I thought things through. Actually, what that meant, really, was my procrastinating for the best part of two years, in which time, the idea of leadership cropped up from the vicar, Bill. With some encouragement from Cyril and Bill, I rather hesitantly started my studies. I remember telling Benny of my decision. His reply was typical; 'I didn't know you were like that'.

Then one day in spring, I was in church painting the corners of the walls over that side. It was lovely and peaceful, as it always is in a church where you're on your own. I began to talk to God as I painted, explaining to him how I wasn't sure that the leadership was the thing for me. In my self-importance, I'd

rather fancied something grander, you know, bags of self-sacrifice, solve the middle-east problem, single-handed. Or something equally useful. Perhaps God, I asked, could point me in the right direction.

And so I walked across the chancel, the chapel on that side, to the vestry on the other, to get some more paint. I committed a huge mistake. I asked God to give me a sign. I know now, Matthew 12.39, 'An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.' That sign, as I read the Book of Jonah, is that if you start fighting the will of God, you get rather more than you bargained for. Well, I passed from the chapel, gently knocked my head on the arch there. Didn't think much of it. Went over, came back again, knocked the arch; I really cracked it and went into spasm, back into spasm. So there I was, falled down right here by the altar. I didn't know whether to laugh because of the apt and humorous way that God had answered me or to cry because of the pain. So I did a bit of both. There hadn't been quite the sign I had in mind, but it spelt out God's answer in the clearest of terms.

I've made you well. Remember the pain you used to suffer? What makes you think that you have the capacity to do such great tasks for me, as you suggest? Now come along, get up, and finish your training. And I did. And there have been no more spasms, and I couldn't wish for a better way to serve God than the ministry that I'm now in. Amen.