

# Study 1: Growth in Numbers

## Acts 2:1-41

It is often said that the events described in Acts 2.1-41 are the 'birthday of the Church'. A powerful modern litany refers to these events, which took place during the Jewish feast of Pentecost in the following prayer:

We remember that your Church  
Was born in wind and fire  
Not to sweep us heavenward  
Like a presumptuous tower  
But to guide us down  
The dusty roads of this world  
So that we may lift up the downcast,  
Heal the broken  
Reconcile what is lost  
And bring peace amidst unrest  
*(Garth House, Litanies for all occasions)*

The birth of the Church accompanied by such powerful symbols of 'wind and fire' is appropriate given the explosive nature of the growth with which it began: Acts 2.41 states that about 3,000 people welcomed Peter's message and were baptised that day. Given the realities of Christian, Anglican, life in modern day Britain – it is understandable that we might look back with a degree of nostalgia to New Testament times, when, it seems, things were apparently rather different!

The Old Testament provides a rich tapestry to help us grasp what exactly is happening here in Acts. As well as the story of Creation – in which, as now, the Spirit had played such a vital part – two other key Old Testament passages seem to provide a theological background and implicit commentary to what is now happening.

The first is the making of the covenant and the giving of the Law at Sinai, which according to Jewish traditions current in the New Testament period happened at the Feast of Weeks or Shavuot. (The word 'Pentecost' is effectively the 'Greek' equivalent of the Hebrew word 'Shavuot'). In Old Testament times it was through these events that the people of Israel became in a real and conscious sense the people of God. So it is very appropriate that the founding of the Church – the beginning of a new era in the story of the people of God – should also take place at the same point in the religious year. It is notable that as a result of the action of the Spirit and of Peter's preaching the response of many was to be 'baptised' – the Christian sacrament of entry to the new covenant.

The other Old Testament allusion seems to be to the story of the building of the Tower of Babel. The primeval history of Genesis 11 recounts how people sought to 'protect' themselves from God by building a tower so high that it reaches up to the heavens. To no avail! God knocked down the tower, scattered the people and 'confused' their languages – so that they were no longer able to understand each other. The work of the Spirit in Acts 2 enables people to overcome Babel's language barrier. Yet it is a mistake to treat the Acts experience at Pentecost simply as a reversal of Babel – the situation is more subtle and complex than that. Babel's builders had sought security in an artificial unity – but had been rewarded by a forced diversity. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has commented, writing about the Genesis story of Babel, God is insisting that people 'make space for difference. God may at times be found in the human other, the one not like us.' It is important to note that in Acts 2 both unity and diversity are present and held in balance – perhaps the best way of describing it is as 'unity in diversity'. The one fire both joins – but also marks out as separate – the disciples in the upper room. The difference between languages is not dissolved – but those present are given the ability to bridge the gap of understanding. So the gift of the Spirit does

not make people identical – but facilitates their mutual understanding, while still preserving their differences. And note the language used in the modern prayer above – which is clearly drawing on a comparison with Babel. Was the problem of the builders of Babel that they sought to build a ‘high tower’ rather than finding God in the ‘dusty roads’ down which the Spirit blew the first disciples?

What does this mean for the life of our Church today – both locally and on the wider scale? Donald McGavran, one of the best known proponents of the ‘Church Growth’ movement, has argued that in order to facilitate church growth it is appropriate to work on what he calls the ‘homogeneous unit principle’ ie that church’s grow more rapidly when their members are from the same or similar social or ethnic groups. There is a lot about this concept on the internet – google ‘Homogeneous Unit Principle Church’, and there are papers that seek to offer positive reasons for this methodology, but, in my view, it contradicts the New Testament understanding of the Church that I have described above, based on Acts 2, – and the effects of grace. What do you think?

One of the roles of a mission agency such as USPG is surely to help churches grow by encountering difference, and by encouraging a process of cross fertilisation between Christians and churches in Britain and those in other parts of the world. But differences can also be encountered more locally, and healthy churches surely need to learn to appreciate the value of difference as they grow.

### **Specifically for Lent: Fire**

*NOTE: This section highlights motifs that could be picked up by those following the course in Lent.*

It is no accident that the birth of the Church is accompanied by tongues of flame. Of all the elements (earth, wind, water, fire) it is fire that is overtly the most dangerous for human existence. Yet it is also essential for the flourishing of human life. Greek myths told of the story of Prometheus who stole ‘fire’ from the gods in order to benefit humanity.

Fire reminds us that to be led by the Holy Spirit can be painful – and can involve us in cost and suffering. Fire and sacrifice belong intimately together. Yet it is even more hazardous to stay away and ‘be safe’. It is only when human beings are prepared to take the risk of drawing near to fire that their human potential can be fully realised. And where the fire of God is concerned there is no safety in safety. TS Eliot’s ‘Little Gidding’ caught the truth of that in well-known lines:

The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre...  
We only live, only suspire  
Consumed by either fire or fire.

Fire and mission belong together. The theologian Emil Brunner famously made the comparison, ‘As fire exists by burning, so the church exists by mission.’ It is only those who are prepared to take the risk of approaching God so closely that they ‘catch fire’ themselves who can share their vision of God with others:

Unless the eye catch fire  
The God will not be seen

Unless the ear catch fire  
The God will not be heard

Unless the eye catch fire  
The God will not be seen

Unless the tongue catch fire  
The God will not be named

Unless the heart catch fire  
The God will not be loved

Unless the mind catch fire  
The God will not be known

*(William Blake)*

The following prayer by Maggie Ross links together 'fire' with the wilderness motif that is so much a part of Christian spirituality during the Lenten season.

Almighty and everliving God  
By your Holy Spirit in the burning bush, in chariots of fire  
And in tongues of flame,  
You have made your people partakers  
In the radiance of your transfigured One:  
Give in courage in temptation and comfort in desolation;  
Show us paths in the desert  
That we may find streams of living water;  
Make us holocaust for your people,  
Pure channels of your love,  
And receive us into the fire of your life;  
Through Christ our Lord.

*(Maggie Ross, 'The Fire of Your Life')*

As we begin this season of Lent let us reflect what being received in the 'fire of God's life' might mean for us as individuals, and how it can help our churches 'catch fire' and grow.

# Study 2: Growth in Depth

## Acts 2:42-47

After the long Bible passage linked to the first session, these verses are comparatively short – but they take us deep into the radical nature of the first Christian community (of course this was actually still at the point when the disciples were referred to as ‘followers of the Way’ – before they had adopted the name of ‘Christians’, a development which is referred to in Acts 11.26). Acts 2.42-47 also links closely with a similar description given Acts 4.4.32-35. The fact that we do have these two passages that both refer to the common life of the community suggests how important an aspect of the ‘growth’ of the Church this was. Notice that there is an intrinsic link made between the worshipping life of the Church, the teaching of the apostles, powerful actions and ‘signs’, and care for those in need – which was facilitated through the sharing of goods and wealth in common by members of the community.

As today – so in the New Testament worship, action and ethics cannot be separated out from each other. But undergirding them all is worship – and it is interesting to note in this passage that there is reference both to participating in the ongoing worship of the temple (which would have been the practice of many devout Jews living in Jerusalem) and the ‘breaking of bread’ (Acts 2.42, 46) which was a special observance of this Christian community. Clearly there is some relation between this practice and the sacrament that we now refer to as the ‘Eucharist’ or ‘Holy Communion’ (indeed the word ‘communion’, *koinonia* in Greek, actually occurs in Acts 2.42 – it is translated as ‘fellowship’ in the NRSV). By this means the disciples celebrated the presence of the Risen Lord among them, for, as Luke’s Gospel specifically recounts, at his resurrection Jesus had made himself known at Emmaus in the breaking of bread (Luke 24.35).

Such shared meals also constituted a reminder of the way that Jesus had lived with his disciples during his earthly life; they seem to have been a characteristic of his ministry, and could even be said to have led to his death, since Jesus’ willingness to extend table fellowship to ‘outsiders’ seems to have led to hostility towards him. It is of course worth observing that Acts makes clear the deep and intrinsic connection between the ‘breaking of bread’ as an act of worship, and the ‘breaking of bread’ that meant food and the material stuff of life was shared between rich and poor alike. We impoverish our understanding of the Eucharist if we lose (as it is all too easy to do) this connection.

The saying by Pedro Arrupe, former leader of the Jesuits, is one I come back to time and again, ‘Whenever in the world a person is hungry, our Eucharist is incomplete’. I believe that in order to grow Christians and churches need to deepen their understanding of the Eucharist: in spite of the fact that it is celebrated in most Anglican churches each week it is comparatively rarely that teaching on the meanings of the Eucharist is given from the pulpit.

Although the sharing of goods in common, the ‘primitive communism’ (as it is sometimes called) of the early Church, did not endure – indeed by the end of Acts 5 it already seems to have run into problems – it stands for us as a ‘sign’ and a reminder of the ‘cost of discipleship’ that the Church forgets at its peril. It is of course part of the biblical background which led to the development of Christian monasticism two or three centuries later. What might such ‘sharing’ mean for us, in our time, and in the ‘communion’ and Anglican Communion we live in today?

An intriguing reflection by Edmund Banyard, which notes that even when Luke/Acts came to be written (towards the end of the first century AD) such a radical way of living was already a ‘memory’, concludes by inviting us to pray for the ‘reality of the Kingdom deep in our hearts.’

'Like the summers of our youth,  
It was already a memory  
When Luke wrote,  
Telling of a people  
In the dawn  
Of the Spirit's power,  
Utterly at one in all things.

Was it memory  
Or dream?  
A dream of how it should have been,  
Must be,  
Will be  
By God's grace  
When his work in us  
Is fully done.

Memory,  
Or dream,  
Or whisper of the Spirit in the heart?  
That they could hold  
All things in common  
And share their meals  
With unaffected joy.

Enable us, Lord Jesus,  
To carry the reality of the Kingdom  
Deep in our hearts.  
Save us from little-mindedness  
And the fears  
That would deny others  
Their part in the good things  
Given for all to enjoy.  
Lead us in the ways of true fellowship  
In our homes,  
In our churches  
And in the world at large.'

(Edmund Banyard, *Turn but a Stone*, NCEC, 1992)

### **Specifically for Lent: Worship and Sacrifice**

The notes above refer to the sacrificial nature of the common life of the early Christians – and their regular practice of attending worship in the Temple, as well as living and praying together as a worshipping community of the resurrection. The note of 'sacrificial living' is appropriate for the time of Lent as we seek as individuals and a church to 'grow in depth'. As suggested in the main notes – the practice of sharing of property that is referred to in these verses became part of the scriptural impetus towards the development of the monastic tradition. In Lent it might be interesting to explore what the religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience might mean in the lives and witness of Christians today who are not living a monastic life in the traditional sense. What do they also mean in the life and witness of the Church? Richard Foster's well known book *Celebration of Discipline* is a resource that could be useful.

# Study 3: Growth in the Community

## Acts 3.1-10; 4.1-22

*In order to ensure that the biblical reading is not too long Acts 3:11-26, in which Peter speaks to the crowd after the miracle of healing, has been omitted from the suggested verses for study. These notes however need to refer also to them – to give a sense of the whole story.*

We noted in the previous study that though they prayed together in their own community, the first Christians also still faithfully attended the regular hours of prayer in the temple (Acts 2.46). This story begins while Peter and John are doing just that – visiting the temple for the afternoon hour of prayer. They meet a crippled man who has been brought by his friends and family to the gate of the temple in order to beg for alms. The family can bring him to the gate of the Temple but no further because blind and lame people considered to be ritually unclean and were therefore prohibited from entering this holy place. It is notable how we are told that immediately after Peter and John cured him he entered the Temple along with them. No wonder he was ‘leaping and dancing’ – this would have been the first time in his life that he would have been allowed through those hallowed portals outside which he had sat for so many years! It is perhaps significant that this healing miracle, the first explicit miracle recounted in Acts, happens to an outsider – rather than someone who is already a member of the Christian community. It is a good example of the church reaching out into the community and growing as a result.

The growth happens in two ways. The first growth is numerical. Acts 4.4 suggests that 5000 people joined the Christian community as a result of witnessing the healing and hearing Peter’s speech. But the church began to grow in another way as well. Perhaps it was as a result of this experience that those first Christians began to ask some serious questions about their relationship to the Temple. On the one hand it served as a symbol of continuity with the Old Testament – and Peter’s speeches in Acts 3 and 4 emphasise also the way that the life, ministry and death of Jesus happened in fulfilment of these scriptures. But could such a Temple, whose gates are such exclusive barriers remain a central focus for a group who believed that God had entrusted them with a promise ‘for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him’ (Acts 2.39), a group who were now beginning to understand the breadth of the promise to Abraham, ‘And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed’. (Acts 3.25)? From this point on in Acts the relationship between the Christian community and the Temple becomes increasingly problematic.

What lessons can we draw from this episode for the life of our church today? Firstly that healthy churches need to be outward looking and to ‘grow’ out into real engagement with the community. Such engagement may well begin (as in this story in Acts) with work designed to relieve the suffering of particular individuals, but eventually, as here, the engagement may well lead to some deeper structural questions needing to be asked about the nature of society, and issues of power, control and inclusion or exclusion. That is true for churches in all parts of the world. Of course asking such questions may be more dangerous in some regions of our world than in others. Just as the healing of the man in Acts leads eventually to the arrest of Peter and John, so too asking serious questions about structures within society – and perhaps seeking to change them – can mean that Anglican Christians in parts of our world can expect to suffer rejection, discrimination or danger. Yet it is part of what ‘growing’ as a Church can mean. In Peter’s speech in Acts 3, for the first time he uses the title *pais* for Jesus (Acts 3.13). This word, normally translated as ‘servant’, seems deliberately chosen to remind us of the role of Jesus Christ as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Those who follow in his path of service for humanity may perhaps expect to experience that Jesus himself knew.

The following prayer – which draws imagery from the early chapters of Acts is a reminder that advocacy for justice in society is one vital role that the Spirit has entrusted to the Church.

## **Responsive prayer**

Where hope has died, and where death rules as lord  
**We will proclaim: 'Let these dry bones live'.**

Where creation groans, and new birth comes but slowly  
**We will listen for the sighs of the Spirit.**

Where the weight of the world oppresses and enslaves  
**We will dream our dreams of a promised land.**

Where hatreds from the past seek to smother the future  
**We will live out visions of transformation.**

Where life is drear, and hope's delight is stifled  
**We will be filled with the joy of new wine.**

Where justice is denied, and truth is made a lie  
**We will stand and bear you witness.**

Where help is needed, and our weakness is exposed  
**We will call upon the name of the Lord.**

Where diversity of faith enriches our common humanity  
**We will know that you are one Lord.**

Where the Spirit's breath sings our world into new harmonies  
**We will glorify our God.**

## **Specifically for Lent: Advocacy/Risk**

Surely Lent is a time when 'risk' should have a special place in the life and learning of Christians? Jesus' period in the wilderness, followed by the liturgical journey towards the Passion offers a model of 'risk' for the sake of the Gospel that his followers are called to emulate. There are of course different kinds of 'risk'. In view of the fact that this week the theme of the course is 'growth into the community' it is important to recognise that there is no one 'fixed pattern' for churches to know the best way to engage with the community. It may be a process of trial and error for churches as they seek the best way to serve the wider community where they are in our varied contemporary contexts. But Lent is a time for reflection on this. And what does this growth into the community mean also for our engagement with the wider church – nationally and internationally? How can we both assist and learn from the 'growth into the life of the community' that churches in other parts of the world engage in?

And as we move towards Passiontide we remind ourselves once more that in many parts of the world such social engagement by churches is not 'cost free'. I write this note the day after the assassination of the Muslim Pakistani politician Saleem Taseer. He was killed precisely because of his desire to remove Pakistan's harsh and discriminatory 'blasphemy laws' so often used against Christians and other minorities. As Christians in Pakistan honour this Muslim who sought justice for them, it is a salutary reminder of the dangers many face in our world as they struggle for human dignity and freedom.

# Study 4: Growth in Generosity

## Acts 6:1-15

Chapter 6 is one of my favourite chapters in Acts. Stephen is a special saint to me, ever since I was fortunate enough to study at the 'Ecole Biblique' in Jerusalem, a church and monastery built on the traditional site of Stephen's martyrdom.

The beginning of the chapter makes it clear that problems had arisen in the life of the community – perhaps partly as it began to grow in numbers and became more diverse. They were problems linked to an equitable division of the community's resources – the 'Hellenists', probably Greek-speaking, whose members had probably not been part of the initial nucleus of the Jerusalem church but had joined it slightly later, had, rightly or wrongly begun to feel a sense of being discriminated against. It would have been easy for the apostles – who would themselves have naturally had links to the other 'Hebrew' group, to have shrugged off the problem in the hope that it would go away! But they didn't. Instead they show a generosity of spirit in taking the initiative to ensure that it is sorted out as efficiently as possible. And so Stephen and six others are chosen as 'deacons' (the actual word 'deacon' is not used to describe them, but the verb *diakoneo* is chosen to describe what they do).

However I do confess to having problems with the words that they then use as they propose their solution. 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.' (Acts 6.2) So often in the history of the church this sentence has been used to justify the 'superiority' of the apostolic, teaching and preaching ministry, over diaconal ministries of service. I have always slightly 'bridled' at this, even though I have to confess that my own ministry lies largely in the 'teaching' sphere. However when working on this passage a few years ago I began to wonder whether Luke is actually being ironic in putting these words in the mouths of Peter and the other apostles. For you see, back in Luke 22.5-7, at the Last Supper, Jesus himself uses a similar expression 'serve tables'. There he said, pronouncing himself as one who serves at table. 'For who is the greater: the one at table or the one who serves (tables)? The one at table, surely? Yet here I am among you as one who serves!'

So perhaps, instead of taking the words of Peter and the others at face value and in all seriousness, we might consider whether Luke is being wryly ironic when he tells us of the hesitancy of the twelve to be table-servers. Is he suggesting that, as on a number of previous occasions, once again Peter is putting his foot in it, once again those apostles have something to learn, something that Stephen and his fellow table-servers have to teach them?

I find Stephen intriguing in a number of respects. In spite of his generosity and willingness to accept a humble ministry of 'table-serving' he also ends up with a successful preaching ministry to match the apostles own – indeed ends up preaching (in Acts 7) the longest sermon in the whole of this biblical book! And can we suggest that it is precisely his willingness to exercise a ministry of service that enables this wider ministry? And there is something else too. In the paragraph above we hinted at the way that Christ himself also claims the role of 'table server'. One of the fascinating features of the narrative of Stephen in Acts 6 and 7 is the way he seems to be presented as a sort of 'icon' of Christ, in both his life and his death. Note how the charges with which Stephen is arraigned in front of the Sanhedrin reflect those with which Jesus himself was charged at the time of his Passion. Note too how the language Stephen uses at the time of his execution (Acts 7.54-60) echo the words that Jesus speaks when hanging on the cross. And note too that in Acts 6.15, 'And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel', that Stephen seems to be transfigured – becoming in fact the only person in the New Testament (other than Jesus himself) to be so. Is it because of his willingness to offer a ministry of service that he has received such an honour?

What might all this mean for the lives of our churches today? It suggests to me that it is perhaps important to discover that the ministry of service is not peripheral and secondary but fundamental to the life of the church and its ability to share the Gospel with power and conviction. More broadly the early Church's willingness to seek out constructive, practical and

generous solutions when confronted with a situation of difficulty and apparent unfairness perhaps offers a model for us to emulate in Church life today.

Gracious God  
For our sake you emptied yourself,  
Revealing your glory and  
gifting us life.  
May we who have glimpsed such generosity,  
Respond with full and thankful hearts,  
Reflecting and sharing your profligate love,  
which refuses to be satisfied  
until it has transfigured the whole world.

### **Specifically for Lent: Transfiguration**

The reference to the 'shining face' of Stephen in Acts 6.15 allows us to reflect briefly on the motif of transfiguration. It is interesting that in the ASB lectionary the reading for the Fourth Sunday of Lent was the gospel account of Jesus' transfiguration (though it was often displaced by Mothering Sunday!). In the current Common Worship lectionary Transfiguration Sunday comes as the Sunday immediately before Lent begins – so the Lenten link for 'transfiguration' still remains. Transfiguration is telling us that God's glory can shine in our world in the here and now – it is not something simply for the end of time, and it is not something that avoids the pain and the suffering of the human condition – rather transfiguration works through and in the midst of this. Notably the gospel accounts of Jesus' transfiguration lead directly in to the healing of the boy with epilepsy – and then fast forward us to the road to Jerusalem and Jesus' cross. Linking Stephen's transfiguration with that of Jesus, it is important to note that transfiguration if it is to be real and genuine has effects beyond itself. Stephen was in a sense a 'first fruits' of Jesus' experience. As we (and the first disciples) look upon the transfigured Jesus we are presented with a challenge – if it does not begin to change us too then it is a vision too dangerous for us to behold. So the 'movement' of transfiguration is ongoing – until (as the Eastern Orthodox icons of the transfiguration suggest) the whole world has been transfigured. This week in the main notes the theme is growth in generosity – and part of that generosity must indeed be allowing ourselves to be changed and transformed for the good and benefit of others. (As of course happened in the story of Stephen – his transfiguration ultimately links to the conversion of Saul and through Saul the wider Gentile world.)

There is a reflection on transfiguration by the biblical scholar Walter Wink which is well worth pondering in Lent:

'Transfiguration is living by vision; standing foursquare in the midst of a broken, tortured, oppressed, starving, dehumanizing reality, yet seeing the invisible, calling it to come, behaving as if it is on the way, sustained by elements of it that have come already, within and among us. In those moments when people are healed, transformed, freed from addictions, obsessions, destructiveness, self worship, or when groups or communities or even, rarely, whole nations glimpse the light of the transcendent in their midst, there the New Creation has come upon us. The world for one brief moment is transfigured. The beyond shines in our midst – on the way to the cross.' (Walter Wink, 'Expository article on Mark 9.2-8' Interpretation 1982 p. 63-67)

# Study 5: Growth in Learning

## Acts 10

In the last session we looked at the story of Stephen. He is, I believe, in a number of ways a pivotal character for the whole book of Acts. First of all it is at his death that Saul/Paul is first introduced into the story of Acts, with the little note 'The witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul... And Saul approved of their killing him.' (Acts 7.58; 8.1) It has long been suggested that this moment impacted on Saul so acutely that it led ultimately to his conversion, when he heard the words of the heavenly Christ 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me' (Acts 9.4). In that moment it seems Paul may have realised that in slaying Stephen he, Paul, had shared in the slaying of Christ himself. So somehow Stephen's identification with Christ has become complete. And because it is so, Paul is converted – and through him ultimately the Gentile world: a deacon has died, and so many will have life.

But perhaps the most important conversion of all that Stephen effects is not of the Gentiles, but of the church itself. You will remember (in the notes relating to the previous session) how Peter and the apostles balked at the ministry of table-serving – and that is why Stephen got appointed to his role. I suggested that Luke – with his comparison and contrast between the apostles and Jesus himself – might have been writing ironically here, telling us that (once again!) Peter still had something to learn, something that Stephen and his fellow table servers could teach them. And if that is the case then the story of Peter's engagement with Cornelius here in Acts 10 suggests to us that he has indeed learned his lesson well.

It is a graphic story that is given in Acts 10. Hospitality and food are central motifs in Cornelius' conversion and its aftermath (and of course provides links back to the story of Stephen). It is no accident that in Peter's vision he is commanded to eat, and demurs because he saw animals that were 'unclean' according to the Jewish food laws. It is clear, not just from this account in Acts, but also from Paul's letters that the greatest single obstacle to Jewish and Gentile Christians forming 'one body' was their different attitudes to food: how might those of Jewish origin continue to observe the biblical food laws, and yet also remain in fellowship with their Gentile brethren. For observant Jews it would have been impossible both to keep the food laws and to eat with Gentiles.

So the vision of Peter, with its symbolism of food, the very nub of the problem for the growing Church, is especially appropriate as the gospel begins to make an impression on the wider world. Peter may not have grasped the whole message straight away, but he certainly moves in the right direction, for he invites Cornelius' messengers to be his house guests.

Somehow the heavens that Stephen sees open as he dies have led the way to the open heaven that Peter glimpses in his vision at Joppa three chapters later in Acts as he has to fight to overcome his traditional prejudices and meet with Gentiles. One of those who could not previously 'serve tables' now is willing to offer hospitality, to share food, to eat and drink, not only with his fellow Christians but also with Cornelius and the servants and family of a Roman soldier. I love the saying by David Ford (of Cambridge University). 'Christian mission is offering the hospitality of the face of Christ'. It seems to me that this story sheds important light on what David is seeking to say.

In the speech that follows, after Peter has journeyed to Caesarea with Cornelius' messengers and met their master, we can see how much he has learned, for he begins with the words, 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.' (Acts 10.34). He then goes on to recount the narrative of the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Christ. Since eating and hospitality are so central to what is happening in this story, it is right that Acts refers to sharing good and drink with one another and with the risen Lord as a hallmark of the new age (Acts 10.41). Peter does not mention the gift of the Holy Spirit in this speech, because the Holy Spirit takes over before he has the chance!

What now happens is often referred to as 'the Gentile Pentecost'. The Holy Spirit is poured out as powerfully as it had been on the original disciples in Jerusalem, 'even on the

Gentiles' (Acts 10.45). This is a sign that something new and formative is happening in the life of the Church. No less significant, though less obviously dramatic, is the note at the end of the chapter that Peter accepted the invitation of Cornelius to 'stay for several days (Acts 10.48). Accepting Gentiles into the Church means more than sharing religious rituals and allowing them to be baptised. The one Spirit that has fallen on Jew and Gentile alike demands that barriers must come down and hostility be replaced by mutual hospitality, at the human as well as religious level.

It seems to me that this key story in Acts has quite a lot to say about the importance of theological education – both for the leaders of the Church, and for 'ordinary' members as well. Theological education is a key part of the 'Growing the Church' theme that is now one of USPG's two main thrusts in its funding (the other being healthcare). In the story of Peter we can see how important for the future life of the Church are the new perspectives he gains – through a combination of learning from the ministry of others (such as Stephen), his knowledge of and reflection on scripture and other religious traditions, his willingness to be affected by his context (is it significant that his dream takes place while he is staying with a tanner, a trade regarded as 'unclean' by many?). Then of course there is the direct action and inspiration of God – through the dream and through the Spirit breaking in while he is still speaking.

So today good quality theological education must offer people the chance to reflect on scripture and on the wisdom and tradition of the Church, to learn from others, to take seriously their context, and to give space, through prayer, for the initiative of God. And when these features are combined something powerful and new can result. And while supporting USPG in seeking to strengthen theological education in many parts of the Anglican world, it is also important for churches in Britain to be committed to the education and learning in faith of their own members. For then too the Spirit can work and a new vision can emerge.

Lord of the church,  
Teacher of disciples,  
You loved your friends to the end,  
And gave them the example of leadership through service.  
May we who follow you today  
accept the radical challenge you still offer  
to your companions on the way throughout all time.  
Stop us short if our values go astray,  
and enable us to discover in obedience a perfect freedom.  
Above all, help us to make your church a pattern for a new world  
Rather than a pale reflection of this one.

### **Specifically for Lent: Learning... the story of Jesus**

If I am ruthlessly honest I don't think that English Anglicans are as assiduous as they might be in learning about the fundamentals of our faith. 'Christian education' is not something that many people in the pew seem to regard with much priority. In this respect many of our fellow Anglicans in other parts of the world can put us to shame.

The main notes for this session focus on the importance of Christian leaders growing in learning and understanding – just as in Acts 10 Peter learns something new – and the church grows as a result. But the Acts account also makes it clear that learning is for all. It is significant that there is far more detail about the life and ministry of Jesus in Peter's speech to Cornelius (Acts 10.34-43) than there has been in his previous speeches in Acts. In part of course this is due to the assumption that Cornelius and his family, as Romans and Gentiles, will not know the basic story of Jesus. And it is important (as for us today) that this story is known and shared. There is increasing concern in British society (not simply in the churches) about the demise of basic Christian religious literacy. It has affected the teaching of other subjects – such as English and history, because without a knowledge of the Christian story so much of the cultural and historical story of Britain just doesn't make sense. Lent is a time for learning – which of course

can take a variety of forms. It doesn't always have to be via books. The liturgy during Passiontide and Holy Week is itself an important educational tool – even if that is not its primary purpose. As this course offered by USPG draws to its close – what ways are you going to explore to ensure that your church (and yourself) continues to grow through learning?