

Acts 20: 1-16

Sermon-Sleepers and Tumbling Teens

Acts of the Apostles sets out in explicit detail a marathon of ministry, as the apostles take the Good News over land and sea throughout the Mediterranean world, establish churches, train leadership, worship and pray and eat together before moving on and doing it all again.

In today's passage Paul delivers his last sermon in Troas and he's determined to make the most of it. Three times Luke says that Paul went on at considerable length (Acts 20: 7, 9, 11).

Some suggest that Paul may have started to preach at a fairly typical hour - perhaps six or seven o'clock, he gets into his stride in the early evening, has his second wind at about 11pm and is still going strong at midnight. It's all a bit much for Eutychus, who overcome with weariness finally loses the battle against sleep and rolls out of the window to his doom. But not to worry! Paul heals the boy and undeterred cracks on with his sermon until daybreak.

Insensitive Paul! Inattentive Eutychus! The obvious lesson - preachers should not go on too long and their hearers should care enough about the Gospel not to fall asleep while it is being preached.

But is that what is actually happening? I would suggest not.

It could be that what we have here is a congregation of believers from various backgrounds gathering when the opportunity provides? Several sources inform us that Eutychus was a fairly common name for slaves. If this was the case, then it might suggest that Eutychus - together with several others of similar circumstances, have made their way to worship once their day's work is done.

A likely interpretation is that we have a group of committed and earnest believers who are seizing the chance to hear the word of God from Paul himself before he moves on. This is a rich opportunity and they are eager to make the most of it.

Besides the length of Paul's talk, the fumes of the lamps and the crush of the crowd would have made breathing somewhat difficult - the flickering lamps may have added to the problem of staying awake by inducing a hypnotic effect on the listeners. It was quite late when the young boy too drowsy stay awake tumbles to the ground. The disciples rushed outside and Eutychus "was picked up dead" (20:9). Paul then

“bending over him took him in his arms” He told the disciples “not to be alarmed, for his life is within him” (20:10).

Luke tells this story in such a manner as to make you wonder if he was really dead or only seemed dead. Still it's doubtful he would have singled out this story if the boy had merely had the wind knocked out of him. Perhaps Luke was trying to show his readers that the power of God was so completely with Paul that such miracles were the natural order of the day.

Paul's gesture of leaning over Eutychus and embracing him serves to remind us of O.T stories of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. Elijah restored the life of the son of the widow of Zarephath, who died from some unspecified illness (1 Kings 17:17-24). Elisha resuscitated the Shunammite's son who died as a result of a farming accident (2 Kings 4:33-36). Luke already told his readers the story of Jesus raising to life the only son of a widow from Nain (Luke 7:11-15) and Peter's raising of Dorcas (Acts 9:36-41). Along with the prophets of Israel, Jesus, and the apostle Peter - Paul can be used by God to do good to the point of reversing a tragic death.

Then after such a dramatic event, Paul becomes hungry during what must have been the middle of the night, eats a meal and continues talking until daylight. Luke concluded the scene by telling his readers outright that young Eutychus had been raised from death: “meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted” (20:12).

Some would say there's a humorous side to the Eutychus episode, but I don't believe that Luke was trying to be humorous. The story gives us a sober glimpse of community life in the early church. They gathered together on the first day of the week. They broke bread together. They listened to the Word. They conversed all night. Far from criticising Paul for preaching too long, perhaps we ought to be commending this gathering for their appetite for fellowship with God and his people.

I think Eutychus was in the right place, with the right people, at the right time, doing the right thing. But there's a challenge here for both preachers and congregations, let our sermons be engaging, let our eyes be open, but most of all let our hearts be open and eager to be where God is making himself known through the preaching of His holy word.

Every Blessing, Linda