

Falling Asleep – Acts 20: 7 – 12



There can be very few preachers who have not become aware from time to time that a member of the congregation has lapsed into peaceful slumber during their sermon. It is rather comforting to know that even St Paul's preaching sometimes produced this effect on people. Acts 20 tells us how he had moved on from Ephesus into Macedonia. After some months in Europe, he had sailed back to Troas, on a return journey to Jerusalem. The

members of the church in Troas obviously wanted to hear as much as they could from him before he embarked on the next stage of his journey.

They met in what appears to have been a kind of tenement building, a common sort of dwelling for less well off people in that region in those days. St Luke recalls that “many lamps were burning in the upstairs room where we were meeting.” Coupled with the fact that a lot of people were crowded together in the room, this would have made the atmosphere quite stuffy. Eutychus, described in the Good News Bible as “a young man”, but probably just a teenager, found it hard to stay awake as the meeting went on and on.

Finally, as Paul continued to speak, Eutychus dropped off! Unfortunately for him, he had been perched on a window ledge, and when he dropped off he did so literally, and fell out of the window. We can imagine the gasps of horror as people realised what had happened, and the rush downstairs and outside, in the hope that Eutychus had survived his fall. Probably they turned to Luke, the doctor, to see if he could do something for the lad, but, he tells us, “When they picked him up, he was dead.”

Paul, however, embraced the motionless body. “Don’t worry”, he told the anxious onlookers, “he is still alive!” They went back upstairs and the meeting continued with the breaking of bread. Then Paul went on talking, not so much preaching as conversing with the gathered congregation, until daybreak.

It is not clear whether Eutychus was taken home immediately after his miraculous restoration to life, or whether he stayed until the end of the meeting. St Luke simply tells us that “they took the young man home and were greatly comforted.” We do not know if “they” were his parents and possibly other family members, or whether Eutychus had been there alone, in which case he would have had quite a story to tell after he arrived home!

Not only have I seen members of the congregation drop off while I was preaching, there have been occasions when I must confess to dropping off myself. My wife, Carole, remembers once praying that I would not fall asleep during an ecumenical service at St Asaph Cathedral. She was in the main congregation, but I was sitting up at the front with the other clergy, in full view of everyone. She could see I was struggling to stay awake, but could not dig me in the ribs as she would have done had we been sitting together. Happily, sleep did not quite get the better of me on that occasion.

I like the words of Psalm 127, verse 2, in the Authorised Version: “He giveth His beloved sleep.” Sleep is a gift from God, and perhaps sometimes, when someone has dozed off during one of my sermons, they needed sleep more than anything I might say. Or maybe my words got through to them subliminally, leaving the message in their subconscious mind even though they were not aware of having heard it. Who knows? We must leave it to the Spirit to blow where He wills and bless us as we need most.

A prayer:

Heavenly Father, we remember people who find it hard to sleep at night, because of chronic pain, anxiety or some other reason. Grant to them restful slumber, so that they may arise refreshed and renewed to face the day.

We remember, too, those working night shifts: nurses and doctors, members of the emergency services, security staff, supply workers and many others. We thank you for all they do to provide for our needs and keep us safe and well. Strengthen them in their duties, and, when they finish work, bless them with deep and undisturbed sleep.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

- Rev John Barnett

Image: *Jacques-François Courtin (1672-1752) - Saint Paul resuscitates Eutyque (Cathédrale Saint-Étienne de Toulouse)*