

Frank Arrives at Neath, Fair Week, 1882.

by T. Mardy Rees

The sermon tells the story of Frank Joshua's arrival in Neath and his ministry with Seth, highlighting their unique approach to evangelism and the challenges they faced, as well as the community's support and the establishment of the first Mission Hall.

Scripture: Psalm 37:4, Psalm 126:5, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 41:10, Acts 5:29, Acts 16:25, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Philippians 4:19, Hebrews 13:16, 1 Peter 4:10

Topics: "Church History", "Evangelism"

Description

T. Mardy Rees preaches about the remarkable beginnings of the Free Mission in Neath in 1882, led by Frank Joshua and Seth, highlighting their courageous evangelism during the town's pleasure fair and the divine origins of their work despite initial skepticism. The sermon delves into the challenges faced by the reformers, the support received from unexpected allies like Archdeacon Griffith, the establishment of the first Mission Hall, and the miraculous provisions made for their ministry. It also explores the unique conversions, confrontations with authorities, and the unity and faith that sustained the missionaries through trials and triumphs.

Transcript

Frank arrives at Neath, Fair Week, 1882. --Account of first Sunday morning service, by Dr. Davies. --Other reformers at Neath, Rev. William Davies and Rev. John Wesley. --Seth joins Frank at Neath. --The reason why. --Seth knocked sinners down and Frank, picked them up. --Archdeacon Griffith a true, friend-- First Mission Hall. --Quaker supporters and others. --Worked without Secretary or Committee. --Wonderful provision for them. --Seth's wedding. --His description of first home. -- Converted clowns and pugilists preach at Neath. --Summoned for Street obstruction. --Gaol threatened. --Fine paid by unknown friend.

FRANK Joshua, under the auspices of the Free Mission, Cinderford, was removed to the ancient town of Neath, in the county of Glamorgan, in September, 1882. His arrival coincided with the great pleasure fair held in the second week of that month, an old institution dating from the Middle Ages, and the rendezvous of thousands of people from the surrounding districts. The wonders of the 1882 fair have been long forgotten, but the fame of the Evangelist who had the courage to sing and speak in the open during the fair will never die. His handsome appearance and magnificent baritone voice captivated the crowd, and the new: mission became the talk of the town.

Some spoke disparagingly, saying that it was: a "novelty," "a flash in the pan," "unorthodox," and that it would soon fizzle out, but God was in that heroic adventure, and the exploits of the last forty-three years declare its divine origin.

The late Dr. Llewelyn Davies, who lived in Orchard Street, opposite the Gwyn Hall, at the unveiling of the mural memorial tablet in the Flail to Frank, the gift of an anonymous admirer, August 9, 1922, related the following incident concerning the Evangelist's first Sunday morning service in the town: -- "I was in the surgery on a Sunday morning forty years ago when I heard a lovely voice singing outside. Strange, thought I, to hear singing on a Sunday morning, but on listening I discovered it was a hymn. I went outside and looked up and down the street, but I could not see anyone. Then I put on my hat and went as far as the Square. There at the corner where Lloyd's Bank is now I saw a fine looking young man with about half-a-dozen supporters. This young man was your late pastor, and he was playing an accordion and singing till the town rang. I watched the half-a-dozen grow into a procession, which paraded the streets singing, led by Frank Joshua. His faultless character and gentleness made him a mighty power for good. I do not think he had a temper. He was always so gentle and meek and sympathetic. What wonders have been wrought since that first Sunday morning service which I had the pleasure of attending in the Square."

Neath to-day is quite a cosmopolitan town. Local industries have brought together people from all parts of the country. Strangers were not so gladly entertained in the town in past generations. The burgesses were jealous of their ancient rights and protected them with rigour. The town, had its own laws in Tudor times; and old customs, die hard. Newcomers were suspect, especially in a religious sense. Some of the noblest religious benefactors in the history of the borough at first received scant courtesy--benefactors who afterwards have been canonised. Let two names suffice, those of the Rev. William Davies, curate of Llantwit, and the Rev. John Wesley. William Davies, a fervid religious reformer in the eighteenth century, encountered fierce opposition from the leading citizens because he protested against the low morals of the town and sought to improve them. Fortunately, Mr. Pinkney, the rector, would hear nothing against his energetic curate while he was alive. However, after his death Davies was removed from his office, but not from his work. His zeal took him into the houses of the people and the playing fields. The ruins of the old Chapel at Gyfylchi on the top of the mountain above Ponrhydyfen proclaim his fame, and the tablet at Bethlehem Green Methodist Chapel reminds the town of its deep obligation to him.

The Rev. John Wesley, who visited Neath in 1746, 1758, 1767, 1768, 1769 and 1781, met with wicked opposition at first, but subsequently became a welcome visitor. In 1746 "one man would fain have interrupted and had procured a drunken fiddler for his second." Wesley disarmed them, "so the gentleman stole away on one side, and the fiddler on the other." There were multitudes of hearers at Neath during his last visits, for he was regarded as the prophet of God.

Frank Joshua received anything but a cordial welcome from certain old inhabitants at the beginning: He had to combat not "drunken fiddlers" but bawling and furious innkeepers. He also has been canonised, and may be called the St. Francis of Neath. Of the work begun by him we may say in the words of Isaiah, "The little one has become a thousand."

Several people have asked why Seth came to Neath after Frank, and not with him. From Seth's own lips we furnish the, answer: "Joblin and Holt, of Cinderford, took Frank to Neath, and although I had no means I said 'I will get there, and will save him from them.' Those two men wanted to exploit Frank's voice, and my purpose in coming to Neath was to save him out of their hands."

Seth and Frank joined together to labour in the town; and in their ministry may be regarded as Peter and John. They began at the spacious station square. "Neither of us could preach a sermon," said Seth. I know now what a sermon is, but I did not know then any more than the man in the moon. Frank would sing, and I would pray, and then we would sing a duet, and then we would give our testimonies. Although we had no preparation, praise God, hundreds were saved." Frank used to say that Seth knocked sinners down and he picked them up. After the fearless fighter had done his work the peerless comforter took charge. Converts rallied to their standard, and the town was literally turned upside down. Vestries were borrowed for meetings, and the Quakers gladly loaned their meeting-house in James Street. Could the walls of that old Quaker chapel but speak of those wonderful nights when souls were brought out of darkness into the light of Truth we should have thrilling epics. Every night after the meeting the women would set to and scrub the floors clean. Fortunately, an anonymous friend supplied the brothers with a tent, which was fixed at the corner of Alexandra Street, and filled to overflowing every night. Even when rain percolated through the canvas the crowd remained steadfast. It was not unusual to see women with umbrellas open inside the tent. Adverse weather had no effect upon the ardent worshippers. The Rev. John Griffiths, Archdeacon of Llandaff and Rector of Neath, took a personal interest in the evangelists and their converts. It was his custom to give them Holy Communion At St. David's Church at eight o'clock on Sunday morning, the converts marching thither in procession from the tent. Some busybody wrote to the Bishop stating that the people who thus partook of the Sacrament had not been confirmed, and the practice was discontinued, but the Archdeacon's friendship was not affected. Love feasts were then observed regularly and they were seasons of rich blessing.

For some time the missionaries met for worship at the old Tabernacle Baptist Chapel in Water Street, but it was wholly inadequate to meet the growing crowds. It was there that I attended the first meeting held by Seth and Frank. How well I remember that Saturday evening when I was separated from my father by the singing crowd in the street and how we found each other later at Water Street Chapel. The fervent prayers and hearty singing still resound in my ears. The bliss of that first meeting is ever an inspiration. Unfortunately neither Seth nor Frank kept the records of those apostolic times. They were too busy harvesting souls to attend to diaries. The foundation stone of the first Mission Hall was laid by Sir H. Hussey Vivian, Bart. M.P. April 17 1884. Its accommodation was for about one thousand people, with provision for a gallery to be fixed if necessary. The gallery was never erected, and the Hall is now used for weeknight services and Sunday School. Archdeacon Griffiths, the Prices, the Gibbins, and other well-known residents took a profound interest in the erection of the first hall. Archdeacon Griffiths arranged a bazaar at Alderman Davies's School, and the proceeds were a splendid nest egg for the new building. The hall was vested in a number of trustees, including Archdeacon Griffiths, Frederick J. Gibbins, and his brother, Henry Price and W. G. Hibbert. The people gave gladly toward the building fund for they had a mind to work.

For several years the brothers had neither secretary nor committee. The collections were taken away on Sunday night, but not counted till Monday morning. The bills for the week were paid on Monday, and when all the obligations were discharged the exchequer very often had only a few coppers left. Once the surplus was four pence and one halfpenny. How could they divide such a sum? "Frank, you take 2½d. this week and perhaps it will be the other way next week." Thus they toiled for God without salary, but He provided great and wonderful things for them. In a happy moment of recollection in March, 1923, Seth told the people at the Hall: "On the other side of Jordan we are going to send a bill in, and you will have to stump up. Frank is over; he cannot send his bill in to you here. I will say this to his memory, I never heard a word of complaint from him in all my life."

Seth married the good angel who told him to "play the man " when tempted to break his temperance pledge at Pontypridd--Miss Mary Rees, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Rees, New Park Farm, Liantrisant. Archdeacon Griffiths officiated in the presence of a large crowd at the Church of St. Thomas, Neath. The wedding had been fixed for Saturday, but the Archdeacon failed to return from London in time owing to another pressing duty, therefore the ceremony took place on Sunday morning, September 23, 1883. Mrs. Joshua had kept company with Seth for several years before his conversion, and was a member of the Church of England. Her own words are best heard a good deal about his running, wrestling, boxing and billiard playing, but Seth was always a gentleman. He could not even then do a mean thing. However, I told him one night that I could never be his wife unless he gave up the drink, and he did. The money he had saved for our wedding was spent on mission work at Blaenavon. We married sooner than we expected because the landlady, Mrs. Moore, was leaving the town and Seth was offered the house. When I look back I am filled with wonder and praise. It was a most amazing time, living by faith and yet wanting nothing. I never handled a salary till we went to Cardiff. When ever I wanted anything Seth would say "Pray first, Mary, and when you receive never forget to return thanks. His faith was endless."

Seth's description of his first home lingers in one's memory: " We landed in Alfred Street. Not a very flash place. There was no swank at all. All that I could do at that time was to rig up a room for Frank, and then another bedroom and the kitchen, which was more like a scullery. The front room had the blinds down. We started like that."

Mrs. Joshua called her husband " my spiritual father." " One day he turned to me, and asked, "Mary, are you saved?' Surprised at such a question I said 'Well, you know, Seth, that I have been confirmed.' ' Yes, my dear,' he added, ' and vaccinated; but are you saved?' " He was the means of leading her into a fuller life and joy than she had ever imagined.

Frank and Seth were brought before the magistrates for street obstruction at the Pump, Penydre, and were fined. A great stir was occasioned in the crowded court by a woman convert, who cried, out: "Those men on the bench are men of sin. I know them and they know me. These men of God have saved me, and you on the bench would stop their good work; but you cannot."

The brothers refused to pay the fine and the alternative was imprisonment. At the time they were living in Alfred Street, and Seth had just married. Well, this is a good beginning," said Seth. His wife prepared a substantial dinner, and the brothers talked about the service they intended holding in prison. If Paul and Silas sang praises at midnight in the Philippian gaol Seth and Frank would emulate their example. " Where are the police? They are a long time coming." A messenger brought the news that the police had intended to seize some of the furniture for the fine, but the crowd had taken the horse out of the shafts, and that the proposal had ended in a fiasco. Then another messenger came and informed them that they could not go to prison after all, because some unknown person had paid the fine.

Converted clowns and pugilists found an open door for preaching at Neath. Freddy Wilson and Dunn, both converted clowns, officiated at the Hall and attracted the multitude. Mrs. Joshua could relate some extraordinary tales about certain, odd, visiting-preachers whom she entertained at Neath.

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