

Easter 4

St Brandon's

Acts 4: 5-12

21 April 2024

We are, of course, still in the Easter season but, a bit like Christmas, it can feel that the feast is over, and we are more in recovery mode than we are able to maintain the momentum that the feast itself generated. But with Easter in particular, apart from maybe a week or so to recover from the emotional and perhaps physical demands of Holy Week and Easter Sunday, we should really be making the most of being able to say Alleluia! as many times as we like, and we should really be climbing again to two more summits – Ascension in less than three weeks, and Pentecost in four weeks' time.

So to try to help us in the climb, or at least in putting our boots back on, I thought this morning we would focus on the Acts reading as a post-Easter, post-resurrection story. But, as with any story, where to begin? Our passage is but a small part of the whole story which really starts at the beginning of Chapter 3, and concludes either with verse 22 or possibly even verse 31 of Chapter 4. But actually, to really understand the story, I think we need to go back before even the beginning of Chapter 3, to Chapter 2 and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the first day of Pentecost. Because we can't really understand this story unless we appreciate that the Holy Spirit had already come, and that the disciples had already been inspired and emboldened by being filled with the Holy Spirit. So, in that sense our passage this morning is slightly out in terms of our timing, with, for us, Pentecost still to come – but I'm sure we can cope with that!

Now after Pentecost the Apostles stayed on in Jerusalem – the enforced dispersion caused by the persecution of the early church following the murder of Stephen is still a few chapters away in Acts. And, at the beginning of Chapter 3, Peter and John go to the Temple at the hour of prayer – so still, in a sense, following the Jewish pattern with the Temple as a focal point of their worship. But there they meet a man lame from birth who asks for alms. And Peter's response is to say, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (3: 6). And the man is instantly healed and enters the Temple with them "walking and leaping and praising God" (3: 8). And Peter uses the opportunity of all the people running to see what had happened to preach another sermon, as he had after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

But that attracts the attention of the priests, the captain of the Temple, and the Sadducees – the religious hierarchy of the day. And they're jolly cross because Peter and John "were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead" (4: 2). So, they arrest them (including, almost certainly, the healed man – what a day he's having!), and put them in custody for the night.

And that's where the passage we had this morning begins. The next day the religious hierarchy get the prisoners to stand in their midst, and their question to Peter and John now makes sense: by what power or by what name had they brought about the healing of the lame man – the man who is standing before them in good health?

There is no disputing the facts in this case, and they recognise this and acknowledge that a notable sign has been done through Peter and John (4: 16). But, of course, they want to get behind the

physical healing to understand, and really to prevent, any further such events, and even more to stifle the teaching that went with it which was based, of course, on the name and, indeed, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

And so, following our passage, noting first that Peter and John were uneducated and ordinary men (4: 13), and being amazed at their boldness, they warn them “to speak no more to anyone in this name”. To which they get another robust response from Peter and John. And to this response they respond by threatening them again.

But then they realise they have to let them go, “finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened” (4: 21). For once, the crowd is on the right side. And the story involving the lame but now healed man ends with the lovely verse, “For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old”! It may reassure many of us to know that God and the early Church weren’t ageist!

So that’s the story. What are we to make of it? What’s in it for us? Well, there are a number of obvious but I think also quite challenging points to make. First, there is the healing of the lame man. This is the first time that any of the Apostles had performed such an act, and it demonstrated that the ministry of healing, which had been such a central part of Jesus’s ministry, was to be continued by the early church. And, of course, it remains a ministry of the church today, even if we have come to understand healing in a more holistic sense than just the physical. How do we reflect that in our practice?

And second, that healing was brought about by the name of Jesus. Peter says to the religious hierarchy: “let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth”. It was, and it is, only by the name of Jesus, through the power of Jesus, that such a healing could occur.

But third, Peter then extends the argument from the physical healing of one man to make a much broader and indeed universal claim about Jesus: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved”. Here is the Christian faith in a sentence. And it is our calling to believe, live out, proclaim what we have come to understand as the truth about Jesus, the truth about God, the truth about our need for salvation, and the truth about God’s provision. How well do we do that?

And fourth, we might note the effect of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit on Peter and John – which is why the story needed to start with Pentecost. Here they are, uneducated and ordinary men, boldly taking on the religious hierarchy, refusing to back down when repeatedly told to stop, refusing to bow to the threats, backing instead their understanding of what God had been and was doing through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Are we similarly emboldened by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit?

Well, as I said, these are all fairly obvious, if rather challenging points. But I want to finish by relating one other thing. It’s part of my weekly practice to use what we might call Christian meditation, sometimes known as contemplation. It involves taking a passage of scripture and taking some time to meditate on it. And when the passage of scripture involves a story, it can involve trying to enter into the story, to become one of the characters in it, to hear and see things

from their perspective. It's, in that sense, imaginative contemplation – and I'm not very good at it.

But I tried it this week on this passage. And what I found, interestingly, alarmingly, was that I was drawn to be one of the religious hierarchy. Now that is probably grumpy old man syndrome, I accept that, but what I found was that I could quite easily identify with the annoyance and the defensiveness of the religious hierarchy. 'Look, things are going fine, we have our very well established Abrahamic faith, we have our rites and rituals, we have our Temple, we have our carefully negotiated pact with the Roman authorities ... and here are these two uneducated, ordinary men potentially undermining all of that. They have the audacity to tell us, to tell me, that God is doing a new work among us. That this Jesus, who we thought we had got rid of, has been raised from the dead. And the trouble is, if that's true, it changes everything. Jesus's resurrection changes everything. And I'd really rather it didn't.'

But it does!

Amen.