

In the Name of Jesus

“By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can see.” Acts 3:16

Two friends and prayer, plus one unsuspecting beggar, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, provide the context in Acts 3 for proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Today, we seek to examine the context and content of Peter’s second Gospel message.

Two Friends and Prayer

Peter and John were together a lot. Both men had strong personalities but they paired up well as a team. Their two names head Luke’s list of apostles (1:13). When Mary Magdala discovered the empty tomb, it was Peter and John who raced to the tomb. John outran Peter and got there first, but apparently he was reluctant to go in. Peter went in first, but when John finally went in “he saw and believed” (Jn 20:3). They were fishing together on the Sea of Galilee when a man called out from shore to throw their nets on the right side of the boat. When they did and caught so many fish that they couldn’t haul in their nets, John said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” Peter jumped in the water and swam to shore leaving John to bring in the boat, towing the net full of fish. When Jesus reinstated Peter and called him to feed his sheep, John was right there. And after Jesus indicated how Peter was going to die, Peter turned and saw John and asked Jesus, “Lord, what about him?”

Both men started out together, but the cost of discipleship would lead them down different paths of faithful service. The early church did not have the luxury of memorial services. Peter would be martyred and John exiled, but they finished up together, receiving “a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 1:11).

Peter and John were a true ministry team. They were the first two disciples to be thrown into jail for preaching the Gospel; the first two to impress their enemies with their courage and their wisdom. Two “unschooled, ordinary men” who “had been with Jesus” and who unexpectedly turned Jerusalem upside down. It is fitting that Peter’s preaching marks the commencement of the early church and John’s revelation marks the end of canonical church history. Together they encompass the New Testament account of the Church: the Book of Acts and the Book of Revelation, Peter and John, quite a team to look at! And the sum and substance of their ministry, from beginning to end was the testimony of Jesus, the Christ. Apart from Jesus they had nothing to give, but in Christ they had everything to give.

Two simple factors set the stage for the Holy Spirit’s ministry through Peter and John: friendship and daily worship. Luke is careful to report the apostle’s respect for the temple liturgy and this is

consistent with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and Peter's in-depth preaching from the Old Testament. There is no break from Judaism because of the conviction that Christ was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and offered "the purest form of Judaism" (Stott, 27).

As part of their daily routine, Peter and John, went up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. They were going to enter the Temple through the gate called Beautiful when they were asked for money by a lame beggar. This may have been the Shushan Gate, which led into the Court of the Gentiles. It was close "to the market for the sale of doves and other offerings and so a fitting site for a beggar to choose" (Williams, 50). Or it might have been the Nicanor Gate, which led from the Court of the Gentiles into the Court of the Women. The first century Jewish historian Josephus describes this gate as a work of art, crafted out of Corinthian bronze and of greater value than "those gates that were plated with silver and set in gold" (Josephus, Jewish War, v.5.3, quoted in Bruce, 83).

In the company of Jesus, the disciples had passed through this gate many times before. Such as the time when Jesus drove out the money changers and the sellers of sheep and cattle from the Court of the Gentiles. That was the day they left the temple with Jesus words echoing in their minds, "It is written, 'My house will be a house of prayer'; but you have made it 'a den of robbers'" (Lk 19:46). Just a little over two months had passed since the disciples were leaving the temple and remarking on its magnificence. It might have been the beauty of this gateway that inspired the disciples to remark on the beauty of the stonework and the value of the gifts dedicated to the temple. Their enthusiasm over the building prompted Jesus to say, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; everyone of them will be thrown down" (Lk 21:6).

The contrast between that day, when the disciples praised the temple buildings, and the day Peter and James went to the temple to pray is remarkable. In Luke's Gospel, the disciple's attention to the buildings is juxtaposed with Jesus' commendation of the poor widow who gave her all. Eight weeks ago, the disciples *didn't get it!* What Jesus said about the poor widow flew right over their heads ("Truly I tell you this poor widow has put in more than all the others"). But following the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, they do get it! Instead of paying attention to the buildings, Peter and John paid attention to a lame beggar.

This raises an important question: Are we still looking at religion from a pre-resurrection, pre-ascension perspective? What difference does the outpouring of the Holy Spirit make for seeing people as potential temples of the Holy Spirit?

"Look at us!"

Given the fact that this beggar in his forties had been lame from birth (4:20), and that he regularly took up a position outside the Beautiful Gate, it seems likely that Jesus and the disciples would have walked by him many times before. How do we explain the fact, that Jesus, who had

healed many, had not healed this lame man (Lk 7:22). First, it is helpful for us to realize that not all people who came in contact with Jesus were healed. By definition, miracles are the exception, not the rule. Philosopher David Hume argued that on the basis of the absolute uniformity of all nature, all miracles were impossible. But C. S. Lewis reasoned that Hume's conclusion rested on an unproven and illogical assumption. How can we explain the rational coherence of nature based on irrational, random processes? But if the coherence and uniformity of nature depends on "a Rational Spirit" then the power to transcend the laws of nature belongs to the Author of life. Miracles are not only possible but probable. The exception proves the rule and far from being inconsistent, miracles are actually the highest consistency (see 102).

Second, miracles are always *signs* that "assert all the more the unity and self-consistency of total reality at some deeper level" (Lewis, *Miracles*, 65). "Each miracle writes for us in small letters something that God has already written, or will write, in letters almost too large to be noticed, across the whole canvas of Nature" (Lewis, 138). Lewis calls these miracles of healing, miracles of the Old Creation, because they focus on "what the God of Nature has already done on a larger scale" (145).

Up until now, Peter had probably seen the lame man many times, but he had never really noticed him. The well worn routine of Peter not noticing and the beggar not expecting much was about to change. As he had many times before, the beggar asked for money, "hoping for something, but expecting nothing, and perhaps not even noticing from whom he asked" (Williams, 48). For the first time, Peter said, "Look at us!" and for the first time the man gave them his attention. Undoubtedly he expected money, but money was not what Peter had in mind. "Silver or gold I do not have," Peter said, "but what I do have I give you."

How the Church says, "Look at us!" and to whom she says it, is critically important. Are we trying to get the right people's attention for the right reasons in the right way? The fact that Peter is now looking at a lame man instead of the beautiful gate is not lamentable but laudable. It is consistent with Jesus' mission statement, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which is lost" (Lk 19:10). Like his Savior and Lord, Peter sought to maximize the impact of the gospel on a person's life without compromising the integrity of the gospel. To do that, Peter began to see the people that he had become used to not seeing. The "invisible" people became visible. He tried to get the attention of the very people he had sought to avoid in the past. When Christians define their "target audience" as people they would like to spend a vacation with, they have exalted personal preference over Christian mission and have confused discernment with discrimination.

Peter made it clear up-front that what the lame man wanted and expected was not what Peter had to give. He was quick to distinguish between the man's felt needs and his spiritual needs. There is a danger, especially today, of the church becoming one more consumer-oriented organization, existing to please people, meet individual felt needs, and cater to self-interest. The *me-gospel* is all about getting one's needs met, finding meaning and satisfaction, discovering a better and more comfortable way to live (Marianne Meyer Thompson, *Reflecting on the Gospel*, Fuller

Theology, News and Notes, Spring 2004, 2). Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon wisely observe: “The church does not exist to ask what needs doing to keep the world running smoothly and then to motivate our people to go do it. The church is not to be judged by how useful we are as a ‘supportive institution’ and our clergy as members of a ‘helping profession.’ The church has its own reason for being, hid within its own mandate and not found in the world” (Resident Aliens, 39).

“It is not enough,” says Henri Nouwen, “for the priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership” (In the Name of Jesus, 43). The heart of Christian leadership “is not dominated by the desire to be relevant but is instead safely anchored in the knowledge of God’s first love” (42).

What is the Gospel?

The one thing that Peter had to give to the lame man was the Gospel and it was the only thing the lame man needed. Peter announced, “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Luke reports the details:

“Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.”

This dramatic miracle set the stage for Peter’s second message, just as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit had provided the occasion for the first message (chapters 2 and 3 run parallel). By their very nature miracles are not routine, but signs of God’s power to bring about salvation. The miracles emphasize that we are neither bodyless souls nor soulless bodies, but bodies and souls in community. God intends to save the whole person. The healing of the lame man is reminiscent of the healing of the paralyzed man whose friends broke up the roof and let the man down into the midst of the crowded room, right in front of Jesus. Seeing their faith, Jesus said, much to the consternation of the Pharisees, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.” And then he proceeded to answer their objections by asking, “Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . .” (Lk 5:20-24).

Can we still depend upon the Holy Spirit to create the context for proclaiming the Gospel? I believe we can, and like Peter and John, we can pray for the lost. The crowd was filled with wonder and amazement at the miracle and they came running to Peter and John. Standing in the place called Solomon’s Colonnade, the same place where Jesus had almost been stoned for saying that “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30), Peter began to speak. “People of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?” I would love the power to heal people, but the question is this: would it lead to a greater proclamation of the Gospel or would it draw a lot of attention to miraculous healing? The

miracle of healing the lame man was designed to set up the proclamation of the Gospel and when Luke told the story the message of the Gospel was more important than the miracle of healing. Presumably Jesus and the disciples had walked by him many times before, but now his healing became the occasion for proclaiming the Gospel.

Peter seized the opportunity and focused completely on Jesus. His message defines the Gospel in a number of significant ways.

(1) The source and strength of the Gospel cannot be explained in humanistic terms. Peter makes that clear when he says, “Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?” Thankfully, the power of the Gospel does not depend upon us. Peter’s first point rules out any hint of personality cult or religious meritocracy. As John the Baptist said of Jesus, “He must become greater; I must become less” (Jn 3:30). Peter’s responsibility was to point people to Christ and we share in that challenge. We are not trying to impress people but to introduce people to the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

(2) The truth of the Gospel is centered in Jesus, whom the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob glorified and whom the Jews handed over, disowned, disdained, and killed. Peter intends here to drive home the absolute disparity between God’s glorification of Jesus and the people’s condemnation of Jesus. Jesus is God’s servant, the Holy and Righteous One, the author of life and the One whom God raised from the dead. By contrast, Peter’s audience treated Jesus worse than a criminal. They denied him justice “and asked that a murderer be released” in his place. Jesus does not assimilate well into the popular culture. Jesus is not a hero, a great teacher, a crusader for a cause, a role model for professionals or a radical for revolutionaries. Jesus is the crucified Savior who went to the cross because of our sins.

(3) Human depravity is summed up in the rejection of Jesus, but human hope is grounded in the resurrected and reigning Jesus. This depravity is not limited to the Jews who participated in the actual crucifixion of Jesus but extends to all of us. The prophet Isaiah said it well, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:6). Sin can be defined as rejecting what God has ordained, commended, and revealed. The most extreme and absolute disparity between what God glorifies and man rejects is found in the Cross of Christ. The Gospel never minimizes sin, but always deals with it as the awful reality that it is.

(4) Peter uses the name of Jesus to express the fullness of the Gospel. In a phrase Peter encompasses everything Jesus represents: not only the specific content of his historical life and character, but the everything revealed in the name of Yahweh. The “Name” was shorthand for everything that Jesus embodied, revealed and represented (Acts 5:41; 3 Jn 7). There was a direct relationship between Jesus and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. All that was attributed to the name of God in Israel’s experience was carried over and applied to Jesus in the faith and practice of the early church.

(5) Peter’s proclamation of the Gospel brings assurance that God’s provision of redemption is

greater than our guilt and condemnation. “Acting in ignorance” should not be confused with innocence nor with a flippant attitude that seeks to minimize sin. Peter could not have stated their responsibility for Christ’s death more boldly. They were guilty of unbelief, hardness of heart, and spiritual blindness, but they were not guilty of knowing that Jesus was the Christ and refusing to believe. Commenting on the “sin against the Holy Spirit” (Mk 3:20-30; Mt 12:22-37) Michael Green writes,

“It is one thing to mistake and misrepresent Jesus, clothed in all his humanity as Son of Man; it is one thing to misread his parabolic teaching, coming as it does in riddles. But it is quite another thing to see the truth clearly and wilfully to reject it; quite another thing to ascribe the power of the Holy Spirit to the devil—which is what the scribes are doing. If people firmly reject the saving work of God in Jesus, they forfeit the very possibility of rescue, not because God will not have them, but because they say, like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, ‘Darkness, be thou my light’” (Green, 36).

Since they had rejected the gospel in ignorance, Peter was calling for repentance and offering forgiveness in Christ, but to reject the gospel in full awareness of what one is rejecting, that is to reject it thoughtfully, willfully, and self-consciously and to persist in that rejection makes repentance and forgiveness impossible (Carson, *Matthew*, 292-292).

The good news of the Gospel is that even though they did not know what they were doing when they handed Jesus over to be crucified, God knew what he was doing. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection were all a part of “God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge” (2:23). God used their ignorance to bring about their salvation. In Peter’s words, “. . . This is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that the Messiah would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God. . .” (3:18). The only danger was that the sin of ignorant unbelief would harden into the sin of persistent, wilful unbelief.

(6) The benefits of the Gospel are expressed in three ways: “. . . Turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.” We tend to stress the first of these three, the forgiveness of our sins, and overlook the other two. Not only does God “wash off, erase, and obliterate” our sin, but God provides “rest, relief, respite and refreshment.” The second promised blessing is “the positive counterpart to forgiveness, for God does not wipe away our sins without adding his refreshment for our spirits” (Stott, 93). Total forgiveness is matched by true restoration. Salvation encompasses justification and sanctification. We are not only free from guilt but we are free to serve. The perfect illustration of this restoration stood by Peter’s side as he preached. The man who was lame could not stop jumping up and down and praising God. Peter explained how this was possible: “By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can see” (3:16).

The third dimension of salvation is eschatological and encompasses the Kingdom of God. Not only is the believer to be forgiven and restored, but the whole of God’s creation will be restored. There will be a new heaven and a new earth and society will be completely transformed by the rule and reign of Christ. Peter did not know when this was going to happen, but he fully believed

it would happen. It was all a matter of God's timing: "Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets" (3:21). Until then, "the whole of creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." Although creation is "subjected to frustration" the day is coming when "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:20-23).

(7) Finally, Peter brings the Gospel message home by emphasizing Jesus' place in Salvation History. This same Jesus of Nazareth, who healed the paralytic and spoke from Solomon's Colonnade, is the Holy and Righteous One glorified by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise through Moses and since he is none other than the prophet promised by Moses; "you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from the people" (3:22-23; Deut 18:15,18,19). Furthermore, Jesus is the one that all the prophets, beginning with Samuel, promised would come. He is the one who fulfills the promise made to Abraham, "Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed" (3:25; Gen 22:18; 26:4). Peter pulls together the various strands of the salvation history story to present Jesus as Israel's Suffering Servant (3:13,18), the true successor to Moses (3:22-23), the ultimate Son of David (3:24), and the true seed of Abraham (3:25).

The last line of Peter's message sums up the Gospel well: "When God raised up his servant, he sent him to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways." The references to the second person match with the four references to what the people had done to Jesus ("You handed him over to be killed. . ."). Until you and I see our responsibility for putting Jesus on the cross, we will not receive Jesus Christ and his redemption. But Jesus was sent to you and me for your blessing and mine.