

Sermon - April 18th 2021 (Andrea Ward)
Acts 3:12-19 & Luke 24:36b-48

My favourite screen presentation of the life of Jesus is Zeforelli's "Jesus of Nazareth" - (well, how could it not be - not because of Robert Powell, but because it was watching its depiction of Jesus on the cross that was the moment God opened my eyes and my heart to Jesus as my Lord and Saviour).

But very near the end of the film, when the women have discovered the empty tomb of Jesus, one of the Temple scribes goes to have a look for himself, and on seeing that the body has indeed gone, he makes the comment (in a resigned tone of voice), "And so it all begins".

After just a short period of quiet, when the Roman and Jewish authorities thought everything was back to normal - the prophet from Nazareth had been dealt with, there were no more strange incidences of people being healed or reported miracles of food being multiplied - suddenly it all started up again, and right under their noses at the Temple gate in Jerusalem. Two of his followers were involved in a dramatic healing of a lame man! Once more, the crowds were getting excited, clamouring to know what had happened and who these two men were, and what special powers they had.

And what takes place next reveals a Peter who has been radically transformed from the confused man that we heard about at the tomb of Jesus; the frightened, startled disciple who thought Jesus was a ghost in Luke 24. *Transformed* by that encounter and many other encounters with his risen Lord, into the witness that Jesus promised he would become in his name. *Transformed* from being on the losing team to the winning team, as Jenny so beautifully illustrated last week.

Last week, we heard John's account of the risen Jesus appearing to Thomas. In our passage from Luke, we take a step back in the timeline to when Jesus appeared for the first time to the disciples gathered together in Jerusalem. They were just trying to get their heads round two of their friends telling them that they'd met the risen Lord while walking to Emmaus, when suddenly Jesus stands among them. It's hardly surprising that they're startled and frightened - after all, you don't expect to find yourself in conversation with a man who's died and been buried, and I mean, it's not like Jesus even politely knocks at the door and waits for them to answer. No, he just appeared from nowhere - no wonder they thought he might be a ghost; the risen Jesus was clearly different. He'd transcended the boundaries of the material and spiritual world!

What Jesus did next was so important not just for the disciples but for believers today. Just as he would with Thomas, Jesus gives the disciples the opportunity to see his hands and feet (i.e. the nail marks from the cross) and to touch him, even eating some fish with them. He gives them physical evidence that he has risen physically from the grave, that he really has overcome the power of death. Jesus gave clear evidence and proof which was absolutely crucial to their becoming confident believers and witnesses.

And secondly, Jesus takes them back to the Scriptures (just as he had with the disciples on the road to Emmaus) and reminds them of what is foretold of him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. He opens their minds to understand the Scriptures. The Lord loves to open our minds and hearts in just the same way to the Scriptures today; it's still the key way in which he reveals himself to us, and it never ceases to amaze me as I read the Bible, how He reveals things I've never noticed before in the Old Testament that point to Jesus, the Messiah. I encourage you to go digging into the Old Testament and see what God shows you.....

So Jesus provides them with tangible evidence that his is physically risen, and he provides them with evidence that all Scripture was pointing to him, the Messiah and what he had come to accomplish. Vital evidence that is recorded for us too so that we might believe, and vital

evidence that we need too to witness to others. And as we turn now to the passage in Acts 3, Peter draws on both as he witnesses to the crowd.

The risen Jesus had ascended to heaven by this point of course, and the Holy Spirit had been poured out, as promised. As I've mentioned already, the reason people start gathering around Peter and John, is because they've just prayed for a lame man who has been dramatically healed. His healing is what gets people's attention and prepares and opens up their hearts to hear the gospel. His healing points to the power of the resurrected Christ and gives Peter the opening to share the gospel.

People today still need evidence of God at work to open their hearts to the gospel; it's God's way of getting their attention.....it may be a physical healing, something miraculous, but for many people it'll be something as simple as seeing a Christian's act of kindness, the Church offering practical support to people who are struggling, the constancy and steadfastness of a relationship with a believer (we should never underestimate the impact of being a faithful friend). Seeing the gospel in deed and action is so often what opens hearts and minds to then hear the gospel in word.

As the people crowded around Peter and John, the question they all wanted answered, surely, was how had this man been healed? "Men 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?" Peter asks,

Everyone had heard that the prophet from Nazareth had been crucified. And every Jew knew that to be hung on a tree was to be considered cursed before God (read Deuteronomy 21:23 - "If a man guilty of a capital offence is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight...because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.") So, for Peter to announce (verse 13) that "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our Fathers has glorified his servant" would have startled his listeners! How could a man left to die a cursed death on a cross (tree) be glorified by God?! It was impossible!

And what follows is a *very* forthright explanation of the events of that terrible yet awesome afternoon that Jesus was crucified. There's absolutely no thought here of putting things nicely. Peter gives a blunt assessment of his listeners' failures and God's victory over those who killed the Messiah:

"You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go (i.e. don't blame this on the Romans, this is your fault). You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this."

Woah! Imagine if you'd been in the crowd listening to that. This is all our doing, your failure and you need to face up to it. Peter has to wake the people up to the grave nature of they have done and to the news that God has outwitted them. In one sense, at that moment, things aren't looking very good for anyone who'd been part of that crowd booing Jesus on Good Friday. But from what we can tell, no one heckled, no one walked away. They seemed to be transfixed. I'm not suggesting that we go round telling everyone what terrible sinners they are; but actually, we (I) can shy away from the reality of people's situation without faith in Christ; we (I) can be so tempted to wrap the message up in such nice, attractive words, avoiding the hard stuff, that we deny people the opportunity to hear the truth of the bad news and thus the wonder of the good news through Christ their Saviour!

The healing of the lame man had caught people's attention; but now was the moment for Peter to point people to Jesus, through with words. Verse 16: "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 given this complete healing to him, as you see."

It was not by Peter or John's hands or words that the man was healed but through faith in the name of Jesus - and no one gets healed by faith in a dead man!!! This man had been healed through faith in the name of a living person., the risen Lord. The healing of the lame man, who that day was made strong and whole, was a sign for everyone gathered there not only of Jesus the Nazarene being alive but that God wanted to bring healing / wholeness to each and everyone.

Here comes the good news for the crowd. Peter, verse 17, says: "Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders."

Yes, they got it terribly wrong, but they didn't know any better. Peter may have been very blunt with the people about their failure, but it was mixed with a deep sense of empathy: because Peter too had got it horribly wrong - worse perhaps, because he knew Jesus, he believed in him and yet he had disowned him and deserted him in Jesus's hour of need. He and they were no different, they had all got it terribly wrong, they had all failed Jesus, and were all in need of his forgiveness and mercy. Like Peter, whenever we share the gospel with others, it comes from that humility and compassion which acknowledges that we're all in this together, all equally in need of God's mercy. We want others to experience the same forgiving love and compassion that God has mercifully shown us.

And just as Jesus, in his encounter with the disciples, had drawn on the evidence in the Scriptures pointing to Himself, so Peter does the same: "But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets saying that his Christ would suffer..."

There is power in God's word to bring revelation and to open people's hearts and minds. "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit" (Hebrews 4:12).

I love the words of Peter that follow - what wonderful hope they offer! "Repent then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord..."

"So that your sins may be wiped out" - the Bible commentator, William Barclay, draws out the real meaning of this illustration. He tells us: "Ancient writing was upon papyrus, and the ink used had no acid in it. It therefore did not bite into the papyrus as modern ink does; it simply lay on top of it. To erase the writing a man might take a wet sponge and simply wipe it away."

For some of us a certain age, we'll remember the chalk board at school being wiped clean, but perhaps the image of deleting all your mistakes in a computer document is the best example because there really is no mark or smear left on the page, no tell-tale sign of what we've erased. Praise God that when God forgives our sins, there's no tell-tale sign, no hint in his record of our sin, however terrible it may have been. This is such a radical, powerful message that it can be offensive to the world but to those who truly repent of their sin, they are released once and for all from the chains of guilt. This is the good news that Jesus had come to bring the world and that Peter and his fellow apostles so boldly witnessed to that day.

"Repent then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord".

"That times of refreshing may come from the Lord". What a wonderful and perhaps unexpected phrase that Peter uses here. He must have been thinking of the day of Pentecost, I think, and the Spirit being poured out upon the disciples.

Repentance is a gift which opens us to the refreshing springs of living water that Jesus promised to us - being filled with the wonderful, healing, reinvigorating presence of the Holy Spirit. You just get such a sense of Peter's compassion for the people and his desire for them to experience

what he and his friends had also personally experienced in their encounter with the risen Lord Jesus.

God wants to bring times of spiritual refreshment for everyone, for each one of us, as we live in that attitude of repentance and reliance upon our risen Saviour and his forgiving work of the cross. And out of that refreshing, the Lord wants us also to share our encounter with the risen Jesus with others - to witness from what our own personal experience.

What joy that must have brought the Lord, as many in the crowd that day responded and became believers (as the next chapter tells us). The Lord did the work in their hearts, but he did it through the witness of Peter and John.

As we think about our personal witness today, here then are four things we can take away from our passage from Acts 3 and Peter's example:

- The people witnessed the Living Lord Jesus in action through the healing of the man, and their attention was caught;
- they heard evidence from Peter's own testimony that Jesus who had been crucified and buried had risen from the dead;
- they heard evidence from the Scriptures that all this had been foretold;
- and they were given the opportunity to understand their need to repent, and the promise of the gift of forgiveness and spiritual refreshing from the Lord.

Our experience will usually be that all of these elements that occurred in the space of an hour or so in this wonderful event, take place over a much longer time, in different stages, and often with different people playing their part. But it offers us a great model for our witness today, a reminder that we do need to give tangible evidence of the love of Christ in deed and action, for this catches people's attention and opens their hearts to the Lord; we have evidence of the risen Lord in the gospel accounts; we have the Word of God, through which God works powerfully to reveal in hearts and minds, we have our own personal testimony, and we have the message of repentance and forgiveness which leads to spiritual refreshment.