

Sermon: Introducing Acts

Sunday, 15 April 2018, Cashmere Presbyterian Church Silvia Purdie

Bible Reading: Acts 3: 1-20

Let me tell you this fabulous story, which takes up two whole chapters in the book of the Acts of the Apostles ... and which in a sense sums up all of the book of the Acts of the Apostles in one 24 hour period.

We're not told exactly when this happened, but as it reads as though it happened pretty soon after the day of Pentecost, so maybe later in the year after Jesus died, within a few months anyway. So when Peter stands up in the Temple court and talks about the killing of Jesus, the people listening would still have very vivid memories, they were there, they saw it; they called 'Hosanna' to Jesus and then they called 'Crucify him' with the crowd. It was still fresh and raw.

But let's back the truck up a bit. After the death and resurrection of Jesus his main body of disciples stayed on in Jerusalem. Jesus had told them to and so they did. Someone was running the Zebedee fishing business back in Gallilee but it wasn't James and John. Jesus's mother, Mary, and his brothers moved from Nazareth and lived from then on in Jerusalem, and Mary Magdalene, and all the apostles. They found some homes to live in, and – well you know what it's like when people come to visit and end up staying for ages and everyone's living on top of each other. And as the early church grew they needed more space, and God provided larger homes. The homes are important.

Well, we don't know the date but we do know the time. It was 3pm, time for afternoon prayer in the Jerusalem Temple, and Peter and John are walking up the steps, as they normally did. But they get interrupted. Interrupted by a look. One of the beggars on the temple steps called out to them, as he normally did, 'Can you help me sirs?' and instead of shrugging off the absence of loose change in their pockets, as they normally did, Peter stopped, and really saw the beggar man. "Look at me" he said. The crowds of people kept on rushing by, missing an astonishing moment begun with a simple look, a connection between these men.

So who was this beggar man? He could not walk, his feet and ankles withered since birth. Nothing wrong with his mind though. He was over 40 years old, which is evidence of the effective care of the Jewish culture; he regularly received gifts of money and food, there at the Temple gate, cared for by his community all his life. And he would have had a family and a home; he probably lived with his brother, who faithfully carried him to the Temple every morning and came back in the afternoon, picked him up and carried him home. Quite a different picture to someone with leprosy; he was not at all a social outcast. He may well have been quite likeable, someone you'd stop and chat with after prayers. But he was not allowed into the Temple. As a disfigured person he was seen as cursed. Decades he'd been sitting there outside the Temple, but he had never been inside.

So, as he did, he reached out for help, but this time he got far more than he hoped for. Not that Peter's words initially sounded much help: "Silver and gold I have none, but what I have I give you" but then a note of command came into Peter's voice as he said "In the name of Jesus Christ from Nazareth, get up and walk!" and before he knew what was happening Peter had pulled him up to his feet and in that instant the man felt blood and feeling and power flowing down his legs and into his ankles and feet.

I guess he might have taken a few wobbly steps first – how would the brain and body work out how to not fall over, if you've never walked before? But incredibly, he was soon not just walking but jumping! Leaping he was.

At preschool music the children's favourite song is 'My friend Jack' – they crouch down as a jack in a box, 'quiet and still', then '1, 2, 3', jumping up and down!

Then hear the importance of the words "he entered the temple with them" ... through the gates, through the doors, into the holy space where God's presence hung heavy in the air.

But not only was he leaping around, he was praising God. Yelling out I don't know what but I guess it sounded quite a lot like 'Yippee!'

So people came running – 'what was the commotion?' Who is making such a fuss? Good heavens, it's the crippled beggar guy from the temple steps. Good heavens!

Next comes the moment which marks the end of transition from fisherman to apostle: Peter stands up and speaks. Never done that before, not like this, not here of all places, in the Temple, the heart of the Jewish faith, where no one speaks unless they are trained and accredited and authorised. The Spirit of Jesus took hold of Peter completely and he stepped right into Jesus's shoes, standing there where Jesus had stood, teaching with authority direct from God.

And Peter got much the same reaction as Jesus had received – a polarised one. One half those listening were amazed, loved it, heard the voice of God, wanted to hear more. And the other half wanted to shut him up and throw him out, wanted none of it.

As for the no-longer-crippled man, he was not going anywhere. He could have quietly slipped out and ran home to see his family. But no, it says that he held on to Peter. So when Peter and John were arrested, he spent the night in jail with them. And when they were dragged before the temple court the next day, he came with them, and when they went back to rejoin the other Christians, I'm guessing, he went with them. And he told his story and he leaped around and praised God some more, and when the Holy Spirit fell on them all until they were all leaping around and praising God, the no-longer-crippled man was right there.

His story is a leaping and jumping one, moving from being stuck, stationary, sitting on the Temple steps day after day, never entering into the presence of God, always outside ... to going right into the Temple, and then finding the presence of God even more powerfully, not in the Temple but in the home of the church.

He went from a life-long bone-deep weight of shame, being under God's curse, to a utterly unexpected body-hurling declaration of God's grace and favour.

He went from social exclusion to being embraced by a community of people.

How? Through one thing and one thing only – the name of Jesus.

In the name and authority of Jesus Peter pulled the man to his feet

In the name and authority of Jesus Peter found his teaching preaching confidence

In the name and authority of Jesus all the people, young and old, received the Holy Spirit in full measure.

The book of Acts is the story of the early church. It tells in many ways and in many places this same story; of ordinary people participating in extraordinary events in the name of Jesus.

The book of Acts begins in Jerusalem, here with Peter and John and the crippled beggar in the Temple, and it ends in Rome. It covers nearly 3 decades.

It begins here in the Temple but most of the action in the book of Acts happens in private homes ... as well as a few public places, roadsides and court rooms. But as I said before, home is the most important, for people learning about fellowship and family and belonging and worship and the breaking of bread. God moves house.

It is the story of women and men who discover that they can do and be so much more than they believed possible.

It's about strong personalities trying to work together in team, sometimes succeeding and sometimes splitting. It's about leadership and arguments and surprises and disappointments. It is always about prayer. It is always about the risen Jesus at work through his Spirit.

I will be talking about Acts in May. I ask you to read it again, at least the first 10 chapters, but you might get carried away and read the whole thing.

As we take up our offering I wonder if you can sit and imagine not being able to walk. For some of us this doesn't take much imagination at all. But imagine being helpless your whole life long.

Imagine sitting on the steps reaching out your hand to passers-by, hoping for a few coins. Then imagine someone taking the time to stop and really see you. Feel the love in Peter's eyes.

Can you possibly imagine being pulled up, standing up for the first time, stepping, walking, jumping ... feel the energy and strength

How would it feel to overflow with praise and thanks to God?

... to tell everyone you meet about what God has done for you!

And then, imagine yourself, as you are now, surrounded by friends, in prayer, and knowing the presence of God in a new way, filling you with joy?

Offering