

## **“Surely, it couldn’t be!?”**

A narrative retelling of Acts 3:1-16  
Peter heals the blind beggar

I was at the temple that day. It was such an exciting time, those weeks after that incredible day of fire and tongues. My husband and I were drawn to that community like moths to a flame. We’d never experienced anything like it. Their love and passion for the Lord, their faith in Jesus. We went often to Temple in those days.

Well, this particular day started out normal enough. We were just kneeling for afternoon prayer when we were distracted by shouting. We tried to ignore it but it got louder, and people started whispering, and I overheard something about ‘Peter’, so I jumped up and ran outside to see what was going on. Over the tops of people’s heads I could see a man jumping up and down, and calling out praises to God at the top of his voice! They were walking into the temple, coming closer to me. Sure enough, there was Peter, and John another of Jesus’ apostles, and with them was a man fair exploding with joy. Who was he?

No, surely, it couldn’t be – What amazement in the people around me as the penny dropped and we all recognised him as the begging scrap of a man with withered feet who would sit every evening on the temple steps. I had always felt so sorry for him, and I gave him a loaf of bread occasionally. He’d been like that since birth, you know. All his life – and he was about my age, not much of a life at all really, not able to walk or work, have a family or anything. To tell you the truth, he was an embarrassment, really. I used to wonder how God could create a child so wrong. Sitting as close as he could to the holy temple, he dared us to believe in a God who makes mistakes, who doesn’t care. – dared us to turn our pity into cash. It was often easier to look the other way.

Surely that wasn’t him! But, yes, there was no doubt about it. The crowd got bigger, and bigger. And then Peter climbed up on a step and started speaking to everyone. And of course he spoke about Jesus, speaking as he does, quoting from scripture, explaining how everything has been leading up to this man, Jesus, claiming that it was in the name of Jesus that the crippled man was healed.

He was still in full flight when loud shouts came from behind me, with the thud of marching boots. I nearly fell over when suddenly there was the temple captain, and the guard, and several priests and officials, all looking

very fine in their robes, and very serious in their anger. Were they mad!! How dare Peter talk about this rebel Nazarene, how dare he talk about people being raised from death! And the guards marched right up to Peter and arrested him, and John, and the man no longer crippled, and just took them away.

We took off then, rushed back to the other followers, and told them what had happened, and we prayed most of the night. Then went back to the temple first thing in the morning, and a whole group of us waited outside the court room for hours, wondering what was going on. Then the door burst open and out they came, released. Some of the priests believe that Jesus was the messiah, and they told us all about how the entire court of the priests and leaders were there, all the big wigs, and how they didn't know what to think about the healing, and how they couldn't believe that Peter was just a lowly fisherman, because he answered their questions with such authority and power. When the elders told him to never speak 'that name' again he just stood there and asked them a question – 'Please sirs, judge for me, should I listen to God's word, or shall I listen to you?' What a cheeky question! I sure they wanted to keep him locked up but they could hear the crowd outside, praising God for the miraculous healing, and they knew they wouldn't get away with it!

What a procession we were as we came back to meet all the others. I've never felt such joy, such praise to God for who he is and what he has done for us. The man who had been healed couldn't stop leaping and singing and shouting. He calmed down a bit when he met all the other Christians, and everyone had to hear the story and we all lifted the roof with song and praise. Then – wham! – the whole house literally shook, and the Holy Spirit filled us all. I'll never forget the sight of that beggar man, standing, filled with God's spirit and power, completely made new.

He stayed with us for a while, but then set off, longing to do all that he never thought he would ever do, travel, worship, preach the gospel, and heal others in the name of Jesus. I'm only sorry that I can't remember his name.

## **Sermon on healing**

*Silvia Purdie*

I wonder whether we have the courage to pray the prayer that those people prayed that day: "Lord, enable us, your servants, to speak your word with boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal. Do signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant, Jesus."

I wonder whether we accept that it was true for them way back then, and maybe for some special people in big churches in other countries ... but lets be realistic, not here in little old Foxton.

I wonder whether we even want that ... it's not a comfortable prayer to pray. It's not our usual, everyday experience of life. Things might be easier without boldness and wonders – they sound dangerous, probably more trouble than they're worth.

I myself still feel quite tentative about these questions. I was brought up to mistrust authority as dictatorial. I was brought up to mistrust boldness as arrogance. I was brought up to mistrust anything spiritual as irrational, dodgy, even hysterical.

When I look back on how I used to be, and when I see some people, I am reminded of that man, crippled, lame, sitting just outside the gate of the temple, brought so far but not actually inside, not actually into the presence of God. I know what it is like to catch glimpses of more, but to be stuck out in the cold. I know what it is like to watch other people going into God's presence, and coming out transformed with peace and joy, but to be stuck at the gate. Have you ever felt like that?

The obvious answer is to not bother trying, to dismiss God as a vain foolish hope, an illusion. We often hear expressed in our society the opinion that religion is , well, OK if you're into that sort of thing, if you need it, if you're a good person, so long as you keep it to yourself. And if our faith is just a system of values, just a quaint hobby, just a social club, then I'd have to agree that it is a bit of a lost cause, really. Why bother with church? Surely you have better things to be doing on a Saturday night, or a Sunday morning, than sitting here listening to me!

Whatever is it that brings you here, week after week? Why do you bother with church?

As for me, well, I'm an oddity, really – OK, you knew that already, but ONE of the ways I'm rather odd is that unlike practically everyone of my

generation, I honestly cannot remember a time in my life when I did not know God and want to come to church. Even when I was lost and confused, I still knew that God was real, that God cared about me in a personal way, that I mattered to him.

Istn't that amazing?! Well, I think it is ... and I knew that because I knew God through both the natural and the supernatural, both in the little ordinary things and occasionally in special, spiritual things. For me, both are essential to a life of authentic faith.

How do you see God in the ordinariness of life? Is it watching the orange chase the pink through the dawn sky? Is it the smell of a cup of coffee – with chocolate, preferably!? Is it the touch of a child, a card in the mail from an old friend? Is it your routines of faithful service, like Joy cutting up apples for the Move and Groove kids? Or George coming round on his scooter every day to check on what's happening round here? Or Frank lovingly turning wood into useful things?

I suppose the crippled man outside the temple gate knew the love of God through ordinary things, through his friends' faithful gentle hands lifting him, carrying him through the dusty streets day in, day out. Through the gifts tossed down from passers by, through the blessings from priests on their way home. But all his 40 long limited years he never knew the glory of God, never knew the power of God, the beauty of the Spirit's presence.

The churches I grew up in preached only the immanence of God, the way God works through you and me. Not the transcendence of God. I never heard as a child or young person about power and glory, about God acting, breaking into the natural world. Do you know what really saddens me? The fact that out of all the hundreds of kids and young people I knew in my youth ministry years, there are only a handful who are active in the church today. The rest just left, like my sister, frankly bored with the church, grown out of God, having found no relevance for this good man Jesus in their daily lives. What a tragedy! They left because they didn't hear God's word spoken in boldness, because they never saw signs and wonders. They left because they never met Jesus for themselves, they only heard about him 3<sup>rd</sup> hand. 3<sup>rd</sup> hand faith is not enough for a busy life. 3<sup>rd</sup> hand faith cannot make the lame to dance. 3<sup>rd</sup> hand faith is not good news.

I long for this church to be a place of life, a place of rejoicing. I long to see signs and wonders, to hear the word of God spoken boldly, both in this building but also outside, across the road, down the street, at the beach. I don't know how to get there. I don't have any magic words or prepackaged strategies. I do know that we saw here last night something of that becoming

a reality. I do know that we had a taste of the kingdom of Jesus, as we heard his name honoured, his power released.

I don't presume to have the authority of Peter, ... I'm still gobsmacked by the cheek of the man, just dragging the crippled man to his feet and saying , "Walk!"

But I do presume to stand on the firm ground of the name of Jesus Christ. I do presume to claim that his Spirit is alive and well, at work in me, and in you also. I still have so much more to learn, and I invite you too to continue to choose to trust God even beyond the point where we know what is happening, even beyond our fears.

Remember that crippled man. He could have shaken off Peter's grip, and laughed bitterly at him, and crashed back down to the paving stones – what do you mean, walk, I can't walk, stupid!

But, no, he chose to accept the gift being offered to him, the gift of life and wholeness, the gift of dancing and praise, the gift of community, worship, power and glory. Of course he didn't! Wouldn't you!?