

Easter 3 year B 2021

'When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this?" ' It is a strange way to start a reading, isn't it? What did Peter see, and why do the people wonder? We have to go back to the beginning of chapter 3 of the Acts of the Apostles, to understand.

Peter and John are on their way to the Temple when they are stopped by a beggar, crippled from birth, looking for money. Even if you don't remember this story I am sure you will remember (from the King James Bible) 'silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I to thee; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk'. And he did - rise up and walk!

This is what the people wondered at - the crippled beggar walking, and what Peter saw was the gathering of a great crowd. Unfortunately, what Peter went on to say has often been used by Christians to justify anti-Semitic beliefs and behaviours. 'You rejected the Holy and Righteous One. You killed the Author of Life'.

But Peter is a Jew, speaking to an audience of Jews, and the early church in Jerusalem was a Jewish movement. In the first and second centuries churches were developed mainly by Jewish

followers of Jesus, only slowly becoming multi-ethnic and multicultural. It is only after Christianity becomes a state approved religion that anti-Semitic tendencies appear, much to our shame.

Peter was not anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic. He was a Jewish Semitic Christian. The one whom Peter preached as crucified and resurrected was a Jew, a Galilean Jew who would have read and sung the Psalms as we have done today - our Jewish heritage. He was the son of the God of Israel, who was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God whom we worship, the God of Life. And note that Peter does not condemn - 'I know that you acted in ignorance' - and from where we stand there is no call for ignorance.

Last week we heard how the growing church looked after its own members - they held all in common - but today we move beyond the believing community - its inreach - to its outreach, its mission to the wider community; the crippled man is not 'one of us', but he is in need - and even though Peter says he has nothing material to offer, he gives what he can - his faith.

God works even when we have no resources - but what if we do have resources? The mandate is no less pressing, and the power

no less available. With our silver we can supply vaccine to poor countries, with our gold we could keep a hospital in Gaza up and running.

This reading from Acts 3 shows us that Christians in mission are recognizable by diaconal acts of service and mercy to anyone in need, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Just as Peter affirms that Jesus was raised from the dead by God and that it is faith in his name which has healed the cripple, so the writer of the Letter of John insists that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate - in the flesh - and that we live (or abide, as John would call it) in him, as we obey his commandments, and that our love of God is - and must be - lived out in our love of neighbour.

These seven verses of John's first letter break into two clear teachings. Vv1-3 assure us of what we have been given, and Vv4-7 refute false teachings about sinfulness, but the writer insists that these two themes cannot be separated - which is hard work for any preacher, because we want to be assured of God's love - to know that we are his children, but we are not so keen on the mention of sinfulness.

We begin with great certainty - 'See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is

what we are'. Was there ever any greater reason for joy and hope? We are the children of God! BUT, oh, there's always a BUT - BUT one small step away from the highest moral standards (socially defined, of course) and we are accused of hypocrisy - 'call yourself a Christian' - or in my case - 'and you're a priest' - or 'why should I believe you if that's how you behave?'. And the writer of 1John is quite firm - 'no one who sins has either seen him or known him'. 'No one who abides in him sins'. That is a bar set awfully high - as we believe, so we behave.

And thus we experience guilt and brokenness - we believe the sorry facts of our lives more than we trust the saving promises of God - more than we trust the truth of love, mercy and grace offered by God through Jesus.

There is a chiasmic difference between sinning and abiding in sin. We all sin - John has already written 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us' (1J 1.8) - so we are all forgiven sinners. Abiding in sin is something of a totally different order - it means a continual, habitual, embraced situation and state - one that doesn't even contemplate thinking 'I shouldn't have done that'. And we have already been told 'If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus

Christ the righteous, and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins,
and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world'
(1John 2.1-2).

So perhaps we should say 'As we believe, so we try to behave' and
when we fail we try again, because we know 'Beloved, we are God's
children now', and it is because we know this that we can accept
the charge to be God's witnesses, agents of his love, speakers of
his truth - forgiven sinners trying to help others to discover the
joy of knowing whose we are - whose we are rather than who we
are, what we are - embracers of the new commandment - love one
another.