

14 April 2024

Acts 3: 12-19  
1 John 3:1-7  
Luke 24:36b-48

The resurrection of Jesus throws the gates wide open, so that all may be welcomed into the presence of God.<sup>1</sup>

As our first reading today, from Acts 3, we heard part of a speech Peter makes to his fellow Israelites in response to one manifestation of this resurrection work.

A man who had been born lame is placed every day at one of the gates to the temple, a gate called Beautiful. He isn't there to pray: he is there so that he can beg for money from those going through the gate into the temple courts to pray.

I find it difficult to imagine what life must have been like for him. He has had to learn to cope with his physical deformity, which is so severe that he has to enlist the help of relatives or friends to *carry* him around. I remember how much I disliked being dependent on others when I was reliant on crutches after breaking an ankle – having to wait for someone to bring a cup of tea to me, and so on. But that was only for some weeks; not the *lifetime* of over 40 years that this man has had to endure.

So there are the physical issues. But worse, because he cannot work, and because there is no social welfare, he must beg for cash to meet his daily needs. I find myself recalling how difficult I found it to sit outside supermarkets with a bucket for the Cancer Society! In that situation I was fit and well; I was of the same standing as those who came and went around me; and I didn't *need* the money I was asking for. Imagine what it must have been like to have been there at the temple, dependent on others to even be there; being of lowly status – perhaps even barred from entry into the temple courts; and very much in need of what might be tossed your way.

But this is the life of this unnamed man, each day brought to the temple gate called Beautiful, begging in the hope that he will obtain enough to get by on. There is no religious significance to his choice of the temple to do this: it is simple economic

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon owes its essential inspiration to Ekblad, *The Beautiful Gate*. Ekblad's work especially among peasant farmers in Honduras and illegal immigrants and prisoners in the US is challenging and inspirational.

pragmatism, as his compatriots in Jerusalem are encouraged to go there three times a day for prayer, generating a great deal of foot traffic through this gate, and as almsgiving is seen as meritorious.

We know nothing else about him: we don't know whether he engaged people with a charming patter, a demanding shout, or an imploring whine. Whatever the case, the purpose is the same: asking for money.

The event that occasions Peter's speech of explanation is this man's healing: his feet and ankles newly strengthened, he is able to leap to his feet and walk. He is able at last to enter the temple courts, and he does so walking and jumping and praising God. The transformation is amazing.

Again I can only imagine what it must have been like. The new physical realities: those limbs now straight and strong; the new experience of walking, of jumping ... how does that even *work*? ... and the new sensations that come from these new experiences.

And in addition to the physical realities, there are the new social and relational realities, and the dawning sense of huge new possibilities. Work. Social status. Perhaps marriage and family. Maybe adventure. Who knows?

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So how has this come about?

It has come about because among the people streaming towards the temple to pray that afternoon are Peter and John. (While in time it would become impossible for followers of Jesus to worship in the temple, in these early days following the resurrection and ascension continued adherence to the practices of their people was not seen as presenting any inherent conflict.)

As Peter and John are about to cross the threshold, the man starts into his usual spiel, asking for money. They allow themselves to be interrupted in their religious pursuit. And Acts tells us that "Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, 'Look at us!'" We are not told the significance of this meeting of the eyes, but I think I understand. When I've sat outside the supermarket collecting for charity I've

noticed how so many people obviously avert their eyes; they intentionally disengage. It feels a bit dehumanising. How much worse for someone begging in order to eat! But then I recognise my own temptation to look away when I see people begging outside the Plaza or up the top end of Broadway Ave.

The beginning of some meaningful change for the man born lame is that Peter and John don't look away when he implores them for money.

But then Peter commands, "Look at us." I picture the man begging with his eyes downcast. He knows rejection; he knows what it is to be snubbed. While putting himself out there vocally in order to press his cause, at the same time he withdraws within himself – a mechanism of self-protection expressed in this avoidance of eye contact.

Peter's apparently abrupt "Look at us" draws the man into a fuller interpersonal encounter; the meeting of eyes so that they might know one another more fully.

The man is of course still in his old mindset: he still expects something from these two men. Hopefully cash; but perhaps abuse. But Peter corrects him of this notion, and sets him on an entirely new course: "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk". And taking the man by the right hand, Peter helps him up into the discovery that he is indeed healed.

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It would have been easy for Peter to have claimed the credit for this healing for himself; for him and John to have basked in the instant celebrity as astonished onlookers in the temple courts recognise the man they had passed by day after day as he begged outside the gate now inside the courts and walking and jumping around as fit as a young deer.

So Peter makes the speech we heard read to us, attributing the work wholly to Jesus. This is work in "Jesus name", in the authority and power of Jesus; a continuation of Jesus work.

And this Jesus is someone they *know*, someone they else they had despised and disowned much like the man born lame.

The people inside the temple courts, able to freely cross the threshold of the Beautiful Gate each day, had perhaps started to take their privilege of inclusion and participation for granted. Had they forgotten their need of God; had they developed an exclusive understanding of what it meant to be children of God; had they forgotten that the presence and power of God can be found anywhere, not just in religious places; had they forgotten that the whole structure and process that enabled them to be there to pray, to worship, to have their sins forgiven was a gift of their gracious and merciful God?

And unfortunately, these people had been blind to the work of God taking place in Jesus – servant of God, Holy and Righteous One, the author of life, the one foretold by the prophets, their Messiah.

On the other hand, Peter and John, who facilitate the man's movement through the Beautiful Gate, have *not* forgotten. They will recall how just three years ago they were plucked from their humble origins to live and travel with Jesus; to be ministered to by him, and to minister alongside him; taught, challenged, corrected by him. And especially, the events of recent weeks will still be vivid in their minds: how they had failed him repeatedly, and how, after his resurrection, he forgave them, commissioned and equipped them. Peter and John, I expect, identify with the man's need as he begs outside the Beautiful Gate.

But this is not just about a kind of “pay it forward” attitude. Peter and John understand that the work of healing is deeply rooted within the whole work of God in Jesus. Peter says, “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 all see.”

Healing is an expression of the breaking in of the new reign of God on earth as it is in heaven. It is a participation in the new creation that has begun in Jesus Christ, who is risen with a body that is renewed, and it is an anticipation of the new creation that will come in its fullness at the end of the age when Christ returns. It is a sharing in the conquest over death which Jesus was the first to enjoy and of which he is the source.

Unfortunately, not all are healed in the present age; and we are still subject to death and disease and decay. The work is not finished. But such healings are signposts and anticipations of the finished work, and in this we rejoice.

And we need to recognise that physical healing is but one kind of transformation that is desirable and available in Jesus. For the man outside the Beautiful Gate, being *seen* and engaged with as a fellow human being, being included in worship, being able to contribute meaningfully to family and society, may all be things that were just as important, or even more important, than the strengthening and straightening of his feet and ankles enabling him to walk. For others it will be receiving forgiveness and release from guilt; for some it will be the ability to forgive others and to find freedom from bitterness; for others it will be consolation for deep losses and hurts; and so on.

All of this transformation is possible because of what Jesus accomplished in his dying and rising again. In him we are made whole. In him we are brought into the family of God – as John writes, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

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Where do you find yourself in this Acts 3 story?

Do you identify with the man outside the Beautiful Gate, trapped in some kind of futility? Perhaps even looking for solutions in the wrong direction?

Call out to Jesus then; call out to those who in his name bear witness to the transforming love of God.

Do you identify with those on the other side of the Gate? Have you perhaps forgotten what God has done for you? Have you become complacent? Have you become blind or indifferent to the needs of those on the outside?

Call out to Jesus, that his Spirit will help you kindle a fire of gratitude for all he has done.

Do you identify with Peter and John, thankful and equipped, doing what you can to help people make the transition through the Beautiful Gate into fullness of life?

Call out to Jesus, giving him the glory, and asking that his Spirit would continue to grow this work in and through you so that you can minister to and advocate for those on the margins today.

“How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

### Sources

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