



15th April 2018
Easter 3
Psalm 4, Acts 3.12-19

Retelling Resurrection

Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.

Over the last few weeks, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of his assassination in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4th 1968, many churches have been remembering the life and ministry of Martin Luther King.

This spell bindingly eloquent Baptist minister from the Deep South of the United States played a seminal role in the story of the advancement of civil rights in that country and during this 50th anniversary I've heard interviews with people who knew him and they have not only wanted to speak of the day he died but the life he lived. They have wanted to help us understand his message and passion. They have wanted to continue his work – of striving in a non-violent way – towards the goal of mutual respect and representation.

And that, it seems to me, is Luke's agenda here in Acts as he writes of the day Peter and John healed a lame man at the temple and then went on to preach a sermon about Jesus and his death and resurrection.

This isn't just plain reporting. This is interpretation.

Luke gives Peter's sermon an edge and fills in the dots. And that was an accepted way of writing history in those days. You didn't only tell the story of your hero, you gave them a speech that explained their passion and reasoning; that made them come alive.

Luke was an historian, responsible for not one but two books in the New Testament, the gospel that bears his name and the continuing story of Jesus through The Church we call The Acts of The Apostles.

Yet we also think of Luke as a doctor, someone with a medical background. So perhaps it shouldn't really surprise us that both his books have an emphasis on healing miracles. Luke obviously loved the idea that part of the Jesus' story was bringing wholeness and well-being to people's lives. In those days these stories had an agenda when retold: making people whole was seen as God's work and evidence of God's action.

However, The Church has always had to be careful not to speak in absolutes in this area.

Many people today have prayed for something like a miracle, often on behalf of a loved one, yet the outcome hasn't been a dramatic healing – instead wholeness has come not with supernatural intervention but through the loving hands of Christlike compassion.

Jesus himself, we are told in John 2, came across people who only believed in him because of his miracles – and that resulted in him being so discouraged at such a shallow understanding of what he was really about.

William Loader, the Australian theologian, puts it like this: Simplistic magical faith marginalises all those people for whom disability or illness is part of life.

In the end Jesus clearly longed for people to have a faith that wasn't based on the spectacular but that went deeper in accepting his call to take up a cross and follow him.

Yet none of that takes away from Luke's clear message to us this morning, on this third Sunday of Easter, exemplified in the actions of Peter and John, that bringing people to wholeness was seen then, and surely must be seen now, as part of the ongoing ministry of Jesus and the way that God still works among us.

This was in clear contrast, then, to the way Jesus was treated that last week of his life in Jerusalem. And it's this miscarriage of justice which is at the core of much of Peter's sermon.

In a nutshell he accuses his contemporaries of getting it wrong. Jesus, he says, is part of the ongoing story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Part of Peter's nation's story. Yet, says Luke, through the voice of Peter, you handed him over to the Romans to have him crucified. You wanted the Jesus' story snuffed out.

Interesting to note here that the death of Jesus isn't described by Peter in a sacrificial, atonement sort of way. In this passage he isn't the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, but the innocent victim of an unjust sentence. He was killed because his teachings of liberation and justice upset the status quo.

Of course, Luke puts Peter's sermon into the post Easter timeline. So, Peter says: you tried to snuff him out, but God raised Jesus up and we are witnesses to his continuing life, presence and truth.

The story is often told of Winston Churchill's last weekend spent at Chequers, just up the road from here. He knew, after losing the election in 1945, that his second term from 1951-55 was his last. So, as he left Chequers for the final time as Prime Minister, after he signed his name in the Visitor's Book he wrote below it: *Finis*.

Finished. It's over. The end.

That, says, Peter, is what you thought the crucifixion brought about for Jesus. Yet we, his followers, are witnesses to his ongoing life and presence.

The whole point, it seems, of Peter's sermon is that those in the crowd might even now

change their minds about who Jesus was and come to view him as the Cosmic Christ, the one Peter calls: The Prince of Life.

In today's lectionary this reading from Acts is paired with Psalm 4. A song from the Jerusalem Temple all about Men of rank dishonouring God's glorious One.

Once again the message of the psalm is about failing to see where, and in whom, God might be at work. It's about a misplaced trust in – well Psalm 4 says, in material wealth – like that owned by those who have an abundance of grain and wine.

For the psalmist there is a divine counterbalance here – as God is praised for giving the singer a heart full of a greater happiness than that which is based on mere possessions alone.

I suppose it all begs the question of where any of us expect to find God? We can all look in the wrong places or, at least, miss God's whisper speaking to us in the unexpected moments.

This week some of us went along to a residential home to take a service. It was a busy day for me and after the service I went around the room to shake hands before rushing off to the next assignment.

I spoke to a lady who told me of the needlework she has done for her church. She looked at me and said: I don't know, it felt to me, at the time, as if every stitch was an act of worship.

They were such beautiful, and I have to say, unexpected words. And that moment has been one of the most precious of my week. I had gone to minister to them – I suppose I was in that rather pompous mindset - yet I came away having received far more than I gave – and I heard, I believe, through the voice of a resident, the whisper of God. It was unexpected – it was a gift and a blessing.

Peter is, I think, pleading with his audience, to see the possibility of God revealing himself to us outside the parameters of the predictable.

Now, lastly this morning, I think we see in today's passage something of what an Easter Church looks like. It looks very much like the ministry of Jesus!

Three characteristics of Jesus' ministry are sort of replicated in Peter's here.

First there is this emphasis on healing and compassion. A lame man begging at the temple. Peter and John enter into his pain and seek, in God's name, to support, encourage and enable him to come to wholeness.

If I was ever rich enough to commission a religious work of art I wouldn't choose a depiction of Jesus the King but Jesus the Healer. Not the Triumphant Christ but the Compassionate.

Moving amongst people, giving them time – healing their minds as well as their bodies, treating them as whole people, valued and loved by God.

That's what John and Peter are doing here. It's part of our calling too as we support Christian Aid, BMS or this morning's Communion Offering for the Nepalese Orphanage.

And after the healing there was proclamation. Peter talks about faith, explores belief and examines the person of Jesus. And in all of this he is Re-telling Resurrection and what the continuing life of Jesus means to him.

Erna and I have the huge privilege of trying to do that week by week from this pulpit. We all have that privilege in our weekday conversations and interactions with family and friends. We speak about faith. We share something of what makes us tick. We are up front about our motivations. And in all this we go about Re-telling Resurrection.

And, yes, after the healing and proclamation there is the confrontation. The authorities arrest John and Peter and they spend that night in prison.

Jesus was crucified because he not only spoke of God's love but also of his justice.

The message of the gospel isn't bland – read the Magnificat – that wonderful biblical manifesto sung by Mary - all about pulling down tyrant kings and lifting up the lowly – the essence of the gospel is radical.

On Easter Sunday evening Hauke and I attended Evening Service at Westminster Abbey. We walked in through the Great West Door and over it are ten statues of 20th century martyrs. Christians who lost their lives, many in our lifetime, because of their faith.

Luther King is amongst them, as is Bonhoeffer and Oscar Romero. Yet there are others, less well known perhaps. Wang Zhiming who in 1972 was killed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Janani Luwum, the Anglican Archbishop of Uganda who lost his life during the rule of Idi Amin.

And Lucian Tapiede, a missionary who stayed by his people in Papua New Guinea and was killed by the axe during the Japanese invasion in 1941. His perpetrator, after the war, converted to Christianity, took Lucian as his own name and built a church in honour of his victim.

The Easter Church needs courage to not only speak of God's love but also of his justice.

Today then, on this third Sunday of the most important Festival of The Church, alongside Peter we have been Re-telling Resurrection. And this week may we live out the words we have said and sung, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.