

Sermon 15 April 2018

Acts 3:12-19 and Luke 24:36b-48

On Friday evening, on my way home from work I bumped into Rob, one of the Trinity students who was with us last year. We only had time to say the briefest of hellos, when he left me, to start running down the road keeping up alongside his small daughter who, looking very serious and yet triumphant, had just mastered the art of pedalling her bike and staying upright. It's a fantastic skill, one that she is unlikely ever to forget. That perfect combination of balance, forward motion, confidence and freedom. I never saw the times of frustration, of falling over, of 'why bother' that there must have been before she achieved her goal.

In our reading from Acts, we see Peter with a similar combination of skills. We join Peter and John just after they have, in the name of Jesus, given a man who was lame from birth, the ability to stand up and walk. Everyone around them is utterly astonished. And Peter, addresses the crowd, saying, it wasn't me who did it, it was done in the name of Jesus, who you all rejected. He seems to be full of confidence. So different from the man we saw on Good Friday, himself rejecting Jesus, then full of shame for having done so, and then again three days later amazed and bewildered, confused by the empty tomb, frightened when Jesus appears, disbelieving and wondering whether it is Jesus, how could it be?

We see Peter now with that perfect combination of understanding, of eloquence, of compassion. His eyes have been opened, his mind has been opened to understand. He has received that powerful gift of the Holy Spirit. And he is echoing those words that Jesus spoke in our gospel reading.

Jesus says that everything that was written about him in the law of Moses, in the prophets and in the psalms must be fulfilled. Luke does not tell us what Jesus pointed to in the scriptures when he spoke in that way. But we do have Luke's record in Acts of what Peter said about it. Peter takes his listeners back to Exodus when God used Moses to rescue the enslaved Israelites from Egypt. Peter is saying that is happening again, that Jesus is the servant who is rescuing God's people. He is the servant of whom it is written in Isaiah 53 who was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; who bore our infirmities and carried our diseases and who was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed. And Jesus himself says that the Messiah must suffer and rise on the third day. In the Old Testament reading set for today, in Zephaniah, the prophet says of God 'he will save the lame, gather the outcast'.

Peter reminds the crowd that they despised and rejected Jesus, they had him killed. He reminds them that God raised Jesus from the dead. He says that the lame man was able to walk, not because of anything that he or John had done or because of their piety, but because Jesus has given him perfect health.

Jesus had commissioned the disciples when he spoke to them, telling them that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in Jesus name to all nations. Peter does just that in his address to the crowd. He says repent. Repent, re-orientate yourself. Have faith in Jesus.

Faith. Peter doesn't ask us to have a faith in system. He asks us to have faith in a person, in a relationship. In a dependable relationship. One we can have confidence in. Jesus did not run away. God did not let him go. In the same way, Jesus will not run away from us, God will not let us go. We will be held even when we feel we can no longer hold on. We will be sustained by God's faithfulness. Sam Wells uses a couple of sporting analogies. Think of yourself as a cricket ball that has been hit so so high in the air. Jesus is the fielder who has us in his sights and knows he will catch us and never let us go. Or a rugby ball that is being fought over, the one who holds it isn't stronger than any one else on the field, isn't bigger, tougher, stronger or a cheat, but wants that ball so much, loves that ball so much, cradles and cherishes it so much that nothing can snatch it away.

Ok, it's not much fun being the ball, hit hard, fought over. We aren't promised an easy life. We are not going to be preserved from peril, from crisis, from pain, assault, anger, aggression and agony, sadness, loneliness, regret. What we can know is that Jesus won't drop us. We see his hands, we see the scars of sacrifice, they are there because he saves us.

And, having experienced that Jesus is dependable, is holding on, isn't running away, we can then become dependable people for those who feel abandoned, who don't know who and where they are.

We can learn to both give and receive love, be enriched by it and be 'given to', be made alive and be 'breathed into'. To find a new state of openness and of joy. Love is more than doing good, it is about having a deep regard for humanity and for God.

All the gifts we have are made to be a proper vehicle for the transforming work of God. The words of one of the verses of the hymn we will shortly sing asks that we feel with Christ's compassion the earth's hunger and pain and that we find the will to fashion new ways where freedom, truth and justice reign, where nations value human life and worth. Jesus gives us that purpose and a belief not just in God but also in humanity.

I find that I read and watch the news less and less these days. I watch people at work who are becoming more and more anxious because they are absorbed by the dreadful details that pile up one after the other, unrelentingly and about which we seem unable to do anything. I know what's going on in the world. I'm not avoiding it. I'm not sticking my fingers in my ears and going la la la and hoping that everyone can be simply cheerful. But I think that if I want God's kingdom to be here on earth, the only bit I can truly be part of is where I am. That life is about forming relationships of interdependence, rather than being isolated and only spending time with people who think like me, act like me and so on. I can learn so much from listening to the hopes, dreams and aspirations of others and their struggles and unhappiness. And perhaps from that I can, in a small way give value to human life and worth to those I meet.

Life can be

about holding on and being held.

Prayer can be about letting God happen in us, letting the Holy Spirit bring Christ alive in us. And Jesus can meet us and bring healing. Healing can come in so many ways. The psalm set for today, Psalm 4 speaks of God putting gladness in my heart and enabling me to lie down and sleep in peace. What else is gladness and peace but profound healing?

We have prayer for healing this morning. If you need peace, if you need sleep, if you need gladness, if you need to be healed of that which harms or hurts, whatever it is that concerns you, we will pray with you that in Jesus name you and those for whom you pray will know wholeness of body, mind and spirit.

For we believe that God is faithful. That he will hold onto us even when we feel we can not hold on to him. And that we are sustained by God's faithfulness. And by our relationship with him. Peter told the crowd that the lame man walked, not because of anything he or John had done but because they had spoken in Jesus' name. Peter was changed by Jesus and by the Holy Spirit. Like the child learning to ride a bike, he developed balance, forward motion, freedom and confidence. May we learn to do the same.

Sarah Thomas 15 April 2018