

## Beggars, all of us

### Acts 3:1-16

Last week we heard about the first days of the church in Jerusalem, meeting and sharing and praying together, and increasing in numbers. A time when *everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles* (Acts 2:43). In chapter three of Luke's account we have our first recorded example of that.

Peter and John paired off together it seems, go to the Temple. The structure of the Jewish religious life was still there and still important. There were formal times of prayer in the Temple and its courts during each day, and the apostles still used this convention, although in the light of new revelation. On this occasion we are told that they met a man stationed at one of the thoroughfares, possibly the main thoroughfare, into the more exclusive Jews-only courts of the temple precincts. A man unable to walk since birth from a congenital defect and condemned to a life of begging in order to survive. Relying on the alms given out by generous members of the public as they went about their business at the temple.

Peter responds to the man's appeal, and disappoints him initially by saying that he has no money for him, but, ... but... performs a miracle by, in faith, calling on the name, that is the authority, of Jesus, to heal the man of his defect and give to him what he had never had though all his years of life.

Peter and John's compassion then opens an opportunity to speak to a gathering crowd drawn by the spectacle of a crippled man doing the impossible – leaping around – and to gawp at the men who had the apparent power to carry out this remarkable healing. Peter grasps the chance to explain the significance of what has happened. And he doesn't pull his punches, effectively accusing them of (being complicit in) the murder of Jesus, but also declaring the resurrection to which he and John are witnesses.

And further on in the chapter, which we did not hear just now, there are a further ten verses in which Peter preaches as he did to the crowd at Pentecost and calls his audience to repent and turn (back) to God.

Now I would like to concentrate on the first part of this chapter and what I would like to share with you is some thoughts on the situation of the lame man

– variously called a beggar, a cripple, a paralytic – and how it reflects on our own lives.

FIRST HIS LOW EXPECTATIONS. Lame from birth, not the result of an accident in later life, too soon to learn a craft, with no alternative but to rely on the generosity (or pity) of others. He at least had some friends who brought him each day to this place – a shrewd choice of location. A busy spot with a high footfall as the religious – and not so religious - Jews came and went to the Temple and its courts. It was considered praiseworthy to give money to beggars so there he was where pious people might see him on their passing.

But hour by hour, day in day out, the expectations must have been low – few respond or respond with little. You can imagine his words, probably barely audible lest he strain his voice by competing with the hubbub, raised eyes. I think we can all recognise the situation whether we've seen it in an underpass at St. George's or by the Westgate Towers to name just two places where begging takes place in this city. Where too there is likely a high failure or rejection rate.

Are we like that. Do we have a low expectation of what God can do for us? Do we impose our own limits by asking little. Perhaps content with our daily allowance of gold and silver – the petty things of the world – when we don't think of lifting our eyes to God in faith and ask for what is really needed (Keith Davis)? We may have given up hope that our own lives might be different. Yet, God is waiting to bless us and give us far more than we can imagine. This man thought he knew what he needed, some cash to see him through the day. But Peter knew what he really needed. And God knows what we really need.

I pray that each one of us would be seeking that from God. As David expresses himself in Psalm 5 “In the morning, O Lord you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.”

LATER ON IN ACTS we read that the lame man was more than 40 years' old. So he had been begging for a long time and was well-known to the crowds who certainly recognised instantly when he was healed. No doubt the apostles had passed him many times before and it is more than likely that Jesus himself will have passed too. So why was it not until now that the man's fundamental needs were met. Why so long until he was healed. Why didn't Jesus reach out and change his life forever? Perhaps we might recall Martha's mild accusation that if Jesus had come earlier Lazarus would not have died. But no for Jesus it

was the fulfilment for God's glory and so that he might be glorified through it. So too the young man blind from birth, as Jesus puts it *happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life* (John 9:3). So that gives us a clue for what might be the answer here – that God's was working his purpose out.

It is God's timing which is perfect and known only to Him. Do we really believe that? We can get impatient and bewildered when prayers do not seem to be answered. This congregation has had to wait for leadership, and a little longer, though we glad to see... at times that has led to frustration. But I think we would all say we were meant to wait.

Ultimately, time in this life pales into insignificance with the timeless future promised those who belong to God. But we are human and our only experience is the here and now, so we need to learn to "wait upon the Lord".

I am reminded of the poster that has spread like wildfire in the few years: you the one - Keep calm and carry on. The poster intended to be used 70 years ago to raise morale at a time of national crisis and hardship, when people were fearful for the future

I would like someone to come up with something similar like "Keep watching and praying", e.g.



AND WHEN THAT HEALING came to the lame man, it wasn't a gradual restoration of mobility, he didn't need to convalesce. Those affected parts, which Luke with his medical eye for detail notes as the feet and ankles, they were now as good as anyone's.

This past week you may have seen the remarkable sight of Corporal Ricky Fergusson carrying the Olympic torch near Telford. He had lost both legs, an eye and fingers in a bomb blast while on duty in Afghanistan. He was doing that barely two and half years later after, but tells of the time, effort, and

medical expertise and care and needed to help him back to “living life to the full”, as he put it.

In contrast our lame man, was up in a moment – or at least when Peter gave him a hand up – so much more than the hand out he was expecting. After forty years without use, with muscle wasting and weakness he was never going to stand – until God intervened and sorted him out for good, not a quick fix to relapse when the excitement was over.

Letting God into our lives - fully into our lives - can be just as dramatic in its effect. Turning lives upside down and enduring. As we shall sing later “Your many gifts will make us new, into our lives Your power breaks through”. “We would... live our lives for You.”

WE READ HE WAS HEALED in the name, that is, the authority, of Jesus through Peter’s faith. We have been healed by his stripes, through the cross we have been saved. Not by anyone else, not by our own abilities, only through the grace of God.

Like the lame man, many or most of us have been brought to where we are today by the faith of others, and so it must go on. As the apostles were commissioned to “preach in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47), so we too are commissioned.

SO HOW DOES THAT man respond to this remarkable transformation? He’s not just up on his feet, he’s off them again because he is quite literally jumping for joy. He went walking and leaping and praising God. Perhaps you know the song: “Peter and John went to pray, they met a lame man on the way.” We could have sung it earlier today.

A man full of joy, celebrating in the way that he thus far been denied ever of doing.

And how often have you heard someone at the front of the church make the observation that they don’t necessarily see rows of faces expressing joy. Yet with the release from the crippling power of sin we should have a lot more joy in our hearts! Now OK I’m a fine one to talk, because I’m frequently caught with a demeanour of anxiety or distraction, and I do admit to a talent to perceive glasses as half empty rather than half full. But shall we make a deal. If I try to be a bit more positive and joyful, then perhaps you can too!

Let us not be satisfied as being as bit of the temple furniture as this man had been, let us reflect the love and power of God in your lives today.

So to summarise...

The lame man had low expectation  
Had to wait 40 years  
Was transformed in a moment  
By the faith and practical help of another  
With the power and the authority of Jesus  
To become the focus of wonder and amazement.  
To lose his daily occupation, such as it was,  
And I imagine soon to become the church's newest recruit.

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