

Acts of the Apostles: 3. 1-19

Psalm 4

1 John 3. 1-2

Luke 24. 36b - 48

There is no word in the New Testament which directly translates into the word resurrection. The word resurrection comes to us from old-French, a language which was used in northern France from the 8th to the 14th century. The term which is used in the New Testament for what happened to Jesus after his crucifixion on that morning of the first day of the week is the term “raised up”. Resurrection is a word which has much more music or poetry to it whereas “raised up” is rather prosaic, everyday. Indeed, it is. Because it is the same term which was used for getting up out of bed in the morning, getting up from a seat, amongst other things. In our reading from Acts there is something happening about being raised up – about resurrection, as we call it – this term “raised up” appears twice. To understand what is happening here it helps to explore the meaning of this phrase.

Firstly, in the healing account we read: Peter said to the lame man, *‘I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.’ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up;*

And secondly, we hear the phrase when Peter is speaking to the crowd about Jesus after the healing has taken place: *But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead.*

Because Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are by the same author, we cannot ignore the resonance between Jesus being risen as the women are told at the tomb on the first day of the week and Peter raising up the lame man. The same thing is going on here.

Luke tells us that Peter and John are going to the temple at 3pm to pray. These faithful Jews continue to worship at the temple and observe the pattern of prayer of their faith. But their going at 3pm is significant - it is the time of the afternoon sacrifice. This is the time when the priests offer sacrifice for sin on behalf of the people. We must also remember it is at 3pm that Jesus – the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world - dies on the cross. The hour of sacrifice.

Now this lame man is at the temple gate. He has never been able to enter the temple because he has been lame from birth. All his life; 40 years he has been in the wilderness. The book of Leviticus decrees:

No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. ¹⁸For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind

or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, ... ²¹*No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. ... he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries;*

The lame man is always at the gate; everyday. But never inside the gate. The purity rules exclude him, relegate him always to the outside. Condemn him forever, because he can never bring a sin offering, and so never have his sin wiped away. He lives in a state of perpetual guilt.

Now Peter could offer him money – the lame man asks for it; but he has none. *But what I do have*, he says: In the name of Jesus Christ, the one whom God raise up ... I'll raise you up too. And so, the lame man can enter the temple. For the first time. No wonder he dances.

In this act of liberation, we hear an echo of Jesus' manifesto in Luke Chapter 2:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

If you recall from our reading of the Gospel on Good Friday, as Jesus dies the curtain of the temple is torn in two; from top to bottom. This law which says that the lame and the blind and the blemished are excluded from the temple is torn open, torn apart, torn up. *he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries* All may now enter. This event is significant for Luke, the master storyteller, because it is the first event recorded after the events of the Day of Pentecost; this is what the coming of the Holy Spirit means. This is no passing event but sets the scene for the mission of the disciples of Jesus.

But what, we might ask, is significant here? Is it the miracle of the man's healing or is it the miracle of him entering the temple for the first time in his life, now with full access to God?

Of course, this passage presents challenges for us post-scientific literalists who feel we need to understand or explain the miracle in all this. But this is not the point of the story. For Luke's readers the resonance will be this lame man being raised up – what we would call resurrected - by Peter and John. They are emissaries of this Jesus who also was cursed; cursed by being hung on the tree. The lame man is cursed and condemned by the law? According to the law Jesus is also cursed and condemned by being hung on the tree? But as Peter says to the crowd about Jesus, God raised him up. So, Peter and John

are continuing the ministry of God who raised up Jesus, exhibiting the same power to break through the boundaries which relegate people to a living death.

All this raises some questions about boundaries for us as we reflect on the passage; about our notions of purity; our notions of worthiness, of who is in and who is out. And it raises questions for us about how we might be involved in patterns of inclusion or exclusion of others. It invites us to see below the surface to see the ways in which our culture leaves people trapped at the gate. And, indeed, it raises questions about how we might exclude people from the church by our unexamined notions of belonging. This interaction at the Beautiful Gate goes to heart of what it means to be at mission; to the heart of participating in the continuing ministry of Jesus; the ministry of raising up; of resurrecting those who are excluded.

Most of us were raised with an understanding that to financially contribute to the work of the Church was the Christian thing to be doing. From our earliest ability to sing we joined in: Hear the pennies dropping ... Too often the church, though, has participated in mission which left people outside the gate. The church's mission to indigenous peoples often kept them sacrificed to our Victorian-era notions that they were sub-human and so could be treated in particular ways. Too often our charity is about dropping pennies over our purity boundaries without us being changed.

A saying of Jesus began to ring in my ears as I reflected on this story. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus says to a group of pharisees after he has healed on the sabbath and the Pharisees have complained about it: *if you had known what this means, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice", you would not have condemned the guiltless.* The lame man is condemned outside the gate. Peter and John have come to know what Jesus meant and so have broken through.

In our own time this story raises for me about the way we in the Uniting Church are engaged in mission. Being the largest social welfare provider in the country we have access to lots of pennies; in the main, government pennies. But I wonder if this *is* mission in the pattern of Jesus? Is this mission actually breaking through boundaries across which people are prohibited from crossing? What are the same kind of boundaries which exclude people in our own time, which leaves them outside the gate? Who are the people to whom we dole out money assuming that they can't come in?

Certainly our imaginative landscape about what it means to be Australian was shifted when the Tampa incident came onto the Australian political horizon. John Howard redefined the boundary of what it means to be Australian when he accused asylum seeker adults of throwing children overboard and saying we don't want people like that here; said we get to decide who comes here and the manner in which they come. These couple of episodes drew a boundary across which it has seemed impossible for asylum seekers to cross. A boundary to which mercy would not be applied. But it is a boundary at which plenty of pennies have been be thrown. The extraordinary amounts of money that have been thrown at Manus Island and Nauru – by governments which pride

themselves on good money management is unconscionable - Detaining a single asylum seeker on Manus or Nauru costs \$400,000 per year, according to the National Commission of Audit in 2014. Amnesty put it at \$570,000 per person in a 2016 report. Asylum seekers condemned as guilty of being un-Australian – or not capable of being truly Australian, always outside the gate, no matter what the cost. A boundary of “so far and no further”, otherwise we will sacrifice you to our notions of purity. This is what has happened to the man at the gate – the purity code has defined him as impure – a person who profaned and outraged.

Peter offers the lame man liberation out of his own financial poverty. This the pattern the church is called to, the resurrection life we each are called to. It calls for imagination – a gift of the spirit – to see through the systems which oppress; it requires courage to confront and cross the boundaries beyond which others have been told they cannot cross; it calls for mercy – mercy which we have been willing to receive ourselves and so can extend to others which resurrects and touches people with the grace of God. As resurrection people we are called to dance and sing, revelling in the abundant mercy of God and so be able to say with the psalmist:

You have put gladness in my heart

More than when wine and grain abound.

He is risen!

Andrew Boyle