

LIPHOOK METHODIST CHURCH
SUNDAY 26 APRIL 2015, 10am
EASTER 4(b)

Reading: Acts 4:5-12.

[slide 1]

For a change I want to go straight to the text this morning. So, you might find it helpful to turn to Acts 4

You may have heard me say before that 90% of biblical interpretation is context. (It also may be true that 90% of statistics are wrong). But whatever the numbers context is always important when reading a passage or a verse. So let's start with the biblical context of this passage.

[slide 2 - click]

This is a continuation of the episode from Acts 3 which started when Peter and John healed a man who had been lame from birth where he sat begging outside the gate to the Temple.

Last week's passage should have been immediately after the healing when Peter spoke to the crowd that gathered because of this unexpected healing. They were amazed and astonished, wondering how it came about and Peter explained to them that it was not their power or godliness but to do with Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen.

The crowd and the attention given by them to Peter and John had attracted the attention of the Temple authorities who went to investigate. These authorities were dominated by a group called the Sadducees who were disturbed by the fact that Peter and John were teaching at all because they were unauthorised and untrained. But they were also upset by what they were teaching. If you remember Jesus had a run in with a group of Sadducees over belief in the resurrection. Peter and John were teaching that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Where we came into the account this morning was at verse 5 where Peter and John had been kept in prison overnight and were brought before the Jewish Council in the morning. **[click]**

This group was also dominated by Sadducees. They collaborated with the Romans in exchange for retaining certain rights to punish wrong doers under Jewish Law. They were the same group that Jesus was brought before on Maundy Thursday night before being taken to the Romans.

The authorities' reaction to a bit of a kerfuffle after a healing seems a bit excessive but their position was precarious; their power and privilege was fragile so they wanted nothing to suggest that they were not keeping their end of the bargain. Any sense that they had not clamped down on a disturbance potentially threatened their position.

It looks like an ordered enquiry into this specific act. There's no false accusation, no false witnesses, no attempt to deny what had happened – just ordered enquiry by the highest possible authorities.

But the question seems an odd one: 'By what power or what name did you do this?' **[click]**

Shakespeare had Juliet ask,
What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet

Juliet implies that it is not the name of something or someone that dictates its nature. To some extent she's right – especially in the context of the play. But biblically and in biblical culture a name sums up all there is about a person. Doing something in the name of someone else implies doing it with all their power and authority.

Because the Council is worried about any threats to their own authority they want to know the nature of the power that has been at work on their patch and on their watch.

It sounds as though they feel threatened, as though the Spirit is already working on consciences. There is a clear understanding that it was not by Peter and John's own power or authority that they healed a lame man. They are concerned about the emergence of a rival power or name to threaten the existing power structures. But equally they haven't thought that in might be the power of God at work.

They are religious people who have confused the power of position with the power of God. This led them to reject the possibility of the power of God operating in others who don't have similar position and status.

It's all very reminiscent of something Jesus said. In Luke 12 Jesus said: 'When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, ¹²for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.'

It seems that what is in this name is a boldness that comes from the presence and work of the Holy Spirit.

Boldness is interesting here. **[click]**

This is boldness that comes from the Spirit. It is the first time that Peter is explicitly described as "filled with the Holy Spirit". But this is not a loud, unsophisticated boldness that speaks of arrogance or seems to generate more heat than light.

This is boldness that simply and clearly establishes the grounds of the investigation and Peter speaks simply and straightforwardly about what he has seen and heard of Jesus. He speaks with boldness in the sense that he doesn't pull his punches or avoid uncomfortable truths.

So, Luke paints this in parallel to the way Jesus was treated and the way Jesus' actions were thought of. Many would not believe that God was active in and through Jesus of Nazareth because it didn't fit with their theology and their view of the world. They rejected him as they reject the possibility of God working through the apostles.

But what Peter sets out with the boldness of the Spirit speaking in and through him is the central text of the good news: **[click]**

In the words of Psalm 118:

The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone

Or in Peter's words that almost echo what he said the previous day to the crowd and are also addressed to all Israel:

know this, you and all the people of Israel: it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

The name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth ... whom God raised from the dead.

He must have known the theological minefield he was getting into by bringing up the subject of the resurrection with a group of powerful, educated Sadducees and yet he doesn't duck the difficult issues.

Luke's accounts, both in the Gospel and in Acts particularly emphasise the resurrection **[click]** as the vindication of all Jesus said and did. It is because God raised Jesus from the dead that the name of Jesus has power to heal in the physical and the spiritual dimension. The reach of the

power of the name of Jesus is even beyond the grave because God lifted Jesus out of the grave and made him Lord and Christ.

So we need a brief mention of the meanings and connections between some of these words.

Lord is the one with authority. Jesus is Lord was the simplest, earliest creed.

Christ is the Greek form of the Hebrew word Messiah that means Saviour. Salvation comes from the same root as healing.

So the one with the authority is the one who has the power to heal and save and it all comes back to the power and authority of God at work in his chosen servants through his Spirit.

Sometimes Acts is known by its full title, The Acts of the Apostles. It is about what the apostles did. But sometimes it is realised that it is not so much about what the Apostles did as what the Holy Spirit did through them so the book gets called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. But a careful reading of Acts shows that it is not about the Apostles, nor is about the Holy Spirit. The primary actor is God.

God raised Jesus from the dead.

God promised God's Spirit.

God poured out God's Spirit.

The power at work in raising a lame man to his feet was the power of God which works in human affairs through the name of Jesus because God raised Jesus from the dead.

That's why Peter can further declare with boldness that

there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.

This is not particularly about the salvation of those who came before Jesus, nor is it particularly about people of other faiths and none who may or may not have heard about Jesus since. We can apply it to those questions and we'll do that in just a moment.

But first, in this context Peter can't have been thinking of faiths beyond Judaism. It is still sometime before he realised that he could take this message even to a Roman soldier and he needed a repeated God-given vision to convince him of that. Here Peter is simply saying that the power of God at work in the world is undeniable on the evidence of this formerly lame man, standing before them able to walk.

In a sense he simply says it must be through Jesus that he and his hearers are saved because God raised Jesus from the dead and it is in his name that this individual was healed and saved.

But there is always another context – and that is the context in which we read it.

So what do we take away from this passage when we read it in Liphook in 2015?

We don't see many pagans in Liphook. We are conscious of being in a multi-cultural and pluralistic world and we probably see more indifference to the Christian message than we do alternatives. But many people stumble over the exclusiveness of verse 12 where we ended this morning.

I'm not sure that a Spirit-driven boldness would put it in quite the same way today.

What Peter was doing was validating the message of Jesus before a hostile audience. He didn't explicitly invalidate anything else, he pointed to the positive power of God at work in the name of Jesus.

I think a Spirit-empowered boldness today will do the same. It is not up to us to disprove or deny any other way of knowing the power of God at work.

A Spirit-emboldened statement of faith today would point to the ways in which God continues to work in the world.

As our verse for the year reminds us, Jesus sends us out to fish for people. **[slide 3]** He didn't say anything about being negative about other anglers. We simply have to put out the bait, attracting the fish to our rods and lines and nets.

That means praying for the Spirit's boldness that we too may do as Jesus told the disciples and as Peter made clear to the crowd in the earlier part of this episode:

Jesus said: You are witnesses of these things.

Peter said: We are witnesses of this.

Witnesses that God raised Jesus from the dead, witnesses that it is because God raised Jesus from the dead that we can still see the work of God going on in the world today:

Still see the work of God going on in the words and actions of his Spirit-empowered people:

- Words and actions that speak of forgiveness when people are not made to pay several times over for their propensity to make a mess of things.

- Words and actions that speak of connectivity and the value of all people.
- Words and actions that seek the common good – perhaps even at one’s own expense
- Words and actions that seek healing and restoration rather than brokenness and division – in personal relationships, in communities and nationally - even in the weeks before an election
- Words and actions that identify injustice and respond to it with the forgiveness of Christ and with moves towards healing, wholeness, freedom and justice
- Words and actions that bear witness to at the gifts and challenges that God gives to us and the transformation that he offers us and has brought about in us
- Words and actions that appreciate the gift of life
- Words and actions that bear witness to the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus as a present reality because it has made a difference to us, has transformed us and continues to make a difference, continues to transform us as it did for Peter and John and countless others down the centuries.

We are witnesses of these things, we are to speak with Spirit-empowered boldness of the work of God in the words and actions of his people.

Amen.