

IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

Acts 3

Acts chapter 2 describes the wonderful events of the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came down on the first Christians. The climax of chapter 2 describes not just the immediate results of that crucial day but the settled pattern of church life and ministry that continued as a result of the Spirit's coming.

The final words of verse 41 are 'that day', but the first words of verse 46 are 'every day'. As evangelical Christians we place a great deal of emphasis on conversion, on repentance, on faith, on coming to know the Lord. Our testimony as Christians often focuses on 'that day' when our lives were turned around and we were born again. But this passage reminds us that the important events of 'that day' are to be lived out in the 'every day'. Our testimony should include what Christ means to us today. God gives us his Holy Spirit to lead a consistent Christian life every day.

Chapter 3 of Acts begins by describing one of those subsequent days in the life of the early church. We don't know how soon or how late it was after Pentecost. We simply read that 'one day' Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer – at three in the afternoon. Godly people were gathering for prayer at the temple. The regular animal sacrifice had been offered in the temple but Peter and John knew that a far greater sacrifice had been offered once and for all when Jesus died on the cross. They were going up to pray. The power of the Spirit did not take away the need to pray. It made them even more aware of that need.

In his commentary Campbell Morgan makes this observation. 'As we look at these two men going up to the Temple, no tongue of fire was resting upon their heads; there was nothing to attract attention; they were walking in the commonplace; the ecstasy of the day of Pentecost had passed.'

I like that expression, 'walking in the commonplace'; because that's where most of us are most of the time: nothing spectacular or sensational. But when we are walking in the power of the Spirit the commonplace can be transformed.

In verse 2 the focus of attention switches from Peter and John to an anonymous man. His name didn't matter. He wasn't anyone important. He was a cripple. He had always been a cripple. His life consisted of being dumped outside the temple every day to beg from the people who were going into the temple. It was a fair test of their religion and for him it was a familiar routine.

Life is full of paradoxes and situations that are unfair. Sometimes the irony of those injustices are very pointed. I think that's the case here. Luke tells us that this poor invalid whose only way of surviving was to beg on the street, was set down next to the temple gate called Beautiful. Scholars think it was the Nicanor Gate, the main eastern entrance to the temple precincts from the Court of the Gentiles. It was made of solid Corinthian brass. It was about 75 feet high (that's twelve times taller than me) and it had huge double doors. It was magnificent.

Imagine for a moment you're a valuer. You have to put a value on that gate. Now look at the poor wretch huddled next to it. What value would you put on him? For some he was just an annoyance, not even worth a glance. For others he was worth a few coins. That would ease their conscience. Not only that, it would gain them merit.

Verse 3. 'When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money.' I wonder how many times Peter and John had seen him before and how they had reacted. What we do know is that this time they made a very positive response.

Verses 4 to 6. 'Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of

Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”

The thing that is striking in this incident is that there was a world of need outside the upper room where the central event of Pentecost took place. The first thing the Spirit did was to thrust the disciples out into that world. They were not to hide away like some monastic order or secret society. Their place was out there, on the streets, among the crowds, face to face with the needs.

For the cripple his request was scarcely a communication. It was more a rote action, a habit. The first thing Peter and John did was to secure his attention. They looked straight at him and asked him to look straight at them. Eye contact is such a crucial part of communication. On TV at the moment we've got a raft of programmes about naughty children. The first step towards taking control is eyeballing them. Someone who won't look you in the eyes is a shifty character, not to be trusted. One of the negative aspects of our TV watching culture is that it tempts us into having conversations without eye contact. We're talking to each other but our eyes are on the box.

Peter and John looked straight at him and told him to look at them. Eye contact and undivided attention. That's the beginning of getting through to people in need. I wonder if Peter and John remembered the parable of the Good Samaritan – or the parable of the Bad Priest and Levite, who passed by on the other side. They didn't make that mistake.

Verses 6 to 8. 'Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.'

The apostles didn't give him what he wanted. He wanted money and they didn't have any to give. But they gave him what he needed. We won't always be able to give people what they want but we have in our possession what they most need, a message of forgiveness and reconciliation, a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Peter took the man by the right hand. It wasn't that he lacked faith. It was a gesture of reassurance and encouragement.

What is described here is more than a miracle of healing. If ever you've broken a bone in your leg and been unable to use it for weeks you know that it takes time before you can use it properly again. The muscle tone has to be built up. There's still a pain barrier to get through. The process of a full recovery takes longer than the healing of the bone itself.

Now here's a man who has been a cripple from birth. Suddenly he's able to walk. More than that, he feels strong. He's able to jump to his feet. So he walks for a bit and then he jumps again. No pain. No weakness. And he shouts out, 'Praise God!' It was more a miracle of creation than a miracle of healing. The transformation was instant and complete – no long period of rehabilitation, just instant strength. And how did it happen? 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.'

Verses 9 to 11. 'When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. While the beggar held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade.'

The reaction of the people reminds us of the situation on the Day of Pentecost when the people were bewildered, utterly amazed, and perplexed. Now they're filled with wonder and amazement; they're astonished. Something's happening and they're not

quite sure what to make of it.

So Peter addresses the crowds again. He doesn't start with a text or a topic. He starts with an event. Something has happened, and it grabs their attention. He doesn't say, 'Come to the meeting next Sunday.' They're already there and he takes the opportunity to explain about Jesus.

Both chapter 2 and chapter 3 describe great events which resulted from the power of the Holy Spirit in which people's lives were changed. It may have all started behind closed doors but it didn't stay that way for long. The disciples burst out onto the streets and the whole community was affected. What God wants to do with us in here is meant to have an impact out there.

There were two reactions to the miracle by the people who witnessed it and we see that in verse 12. 'When Peter saw [the people running towards him], he said to them: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?"' The ordinary people were looking in two directions. They were looking at the cripple, now leaping and praising God, and they were looking at Peter and John. They were astonished by the miracle and by the people who had performed it.

And Peter said, 'Stop. You're looking in the wrong place. The important thing is not him. The important thing is not us. It's Jesus.' When God moves in people's lives and changes them for the better it will have an impact on the community out there, but they will still need an explanation. Otherwise they will miss the point that it's Jesus who has done this.

Verse 16: 'By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.'

On both occasions, Acts chapter 2 and Acts chapter 3, Peter was careful to explain what had happened and to use the opportunity to point to Jesus. There are always these two aspects to our witness: our lives and our words. If we just witness with our words and it's not backed up by the way we live, we will be guilty of hypocrisy, and of misrepresenting God. If we just witness by our lives and never tell people about Jesus we will be guilty of robbing Jesus of the glory that is rightfully his. Words *and* lives. That's the key to authentic witnessing.

As Peter explained the good news of the gospel he began by reminding them of what they had done.

Verses 13 to 15. 'You handed [Jesus] over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life.'

There are all sorts of nuances in here. Twice Peter says, 'you disowned him'. You denied him. That was just what Peter had done and he himself had had to face the truth about his own failure. Pilate, the Gentile, the Roman governor, had decided to let him go, but you, the Jews, God's people, insisted that he be killed. You killed the author of life.

This is no fairy tale. This isn't killing the goose that laid the golden egg. This is serious stuff. 'You killed the author of life.' The first step to getting right with God is to be honest with ourselves, honest about ourselves.

Behold the man upon a cross, my sin upon his shoulders;
ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held him there until it was accomplished;
his dying breath has brought me life - I know that it is finished.

Peter reminded them of what they had done. But he also reminded them of what

God had done. Verse 13: 'The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus.' Verse 15: 'You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.'

Peter goes on to tie together these two things: what they had done and what God had done. Verses 17 and 18: 'Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer.'

The sufferings of Jesus were more than a miscarriage of justice. They were more than a terrible indictment of human sin. They were God's way of dealing with sin, God's way of providing salvation. It all centred on the true identity of Jesus, who Jesus really was.

Peter describes him in a number of ways. He is God's servant (13), the Holy and Righteous One (14), the author of life, the Messiah, the prophet foretold by Moses, the prophet who would be like Moses, the seed of Abraham who would bring the blessing promised to Abraham. And what was that blessing?

Verse 26: 'When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.'

Peter's message reaches its climax in a call to repentance. Verses 19–21 'Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ [the Messiah], who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.'

Jesus is coming again. He will return and when he comes there will be times of refreshing and times of restoration for the world. But meantime we can know his coming individually when we turn from our sins and welcome him into our hearts.

The cripple begging by the Beautiful Gate of the temple had a need. Everyone acknowledged that, and the Lord met his need. But those other people going in and out of the temple also had a need – in reality, a deeper need.

As we look at the world around us we can see the needs: poverty, injustice, feral youths and frightened citizens, homelessness, crime, physical and mental illness. There are needs all around us, but we all have needs deep within us: the deceitfulness of sin, the inadequacy of our own inner resources, our need for Jesus and his salvation.