**Portraits of First Followers: The Man Born Lame**

As we journey through Acts during this Eastertide we are looking at six ordinary individuals and what they experienced in those days following that great Passover where Jesus was crucified and then raised from the dead.

This week we are looking at a portrait of a man born lame who happens to be in the right place at the right time.

Last week I pointed out that Acts is a series of dramatic scenarios that moves from the Ascension to the first speeches and acts of Peter and other leaders, and so on eventually to the exploits of Paul in the second half of the book.

As we often observe in the stories of the Bible, *where* things take place is often as important as *what* takes place.[[1]](#endnote-1) This story today takes place in the Temple, so as with the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus and the trial before the Temple hierarchy, I continue to see this story as about how The Way is different from Temple-based Judaism.

And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple.

Let’s profile this dear man who sat begging at The Beautiful Gate.



The gate is no longer visible in Jerusalem and sources can’t agree on where it was, but suffice it to say it was a side entrance to Solomon’s Portico, a colonnade that ringed the Temple complex, and where the Jerusalem church was meeting at the time (Acts 5:12). Josephus describes one candidate for the gate as, “of Corinthian brass, and greatly excelled those that were only covered with silver and gold” (*Wars,* 5.201). You can think of Peter’s comment to the man … silver and gold have I none… as a reference to the gate at which they stand. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.

Jerusalem was a compassionate city. Seeing to the needs of the poor and infirm was a strong tradition. Caring for the widow, the poor and the sick a central principle of the classical prophets, and a very important one to Jesus of course. Among the First Followers they also carefully followed the ethic of charity by making a daily distribution of food to the poor; that is two meals in a 24-hour cycle (see Acts 6:2).

Do you recall that before Easter I had mentioned that making a living in Jerusalem, notwithstanding that it was packed with travellers for many days of the year, because the exacting standards of ritual purity made business dealings complex? It was not an easy city to be own a market or trading house given the necessity of ensuring the ritual purity of food, especially with regards to tithing. There were lots and lots of poor folks who needed alms.

As a result, many relied on the charity of pilgrims, who brought their second tithe to the city to distribute to the poor, and of course locals for whom compassion to the poor was a religious devotion.

If you visit modern Jerusalem and are quietly observant of those who seek alms on the street even today, you will see the patience and tenderness of Jerusalemites to the needy, never failing to stop and give comfort and a coin. I found it quite moving in the midst of the tension and chaos of that complicated city.

He was an old man. He was 40 Acts 4:22 tells us. The average life expectancy at this time was 30-35 years old. In fact average life expectancy was still 40 years old in 1800. In the last 200 years the vast blessings of modern medicine have produced a doubling of life expectancy to 82.2 in Canada today. God using us to heal ourselves.

That he was lame from birth (congenital) carried many social and economic implications for the man and his family.[[2]](#endnote-2) Obviously he could not work and was therefore a burden to all around him, especially his family. Work was viewed as at the centre of a man’s responsibility to God. In the Garden of Eden we are told that The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it (Gen 2:15). I know everyone wants to retire, but work is the greatest blessing of all, just ask the unemployed.

Most people saw such an affliction as evidence of a person’s sin, or in this case his parents’ sin. In John 9 they Jesus about the man born blind Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? (Jn 9:2)

It was neither said Jesus, but so that …the works of God might be revealed in him (Jn 9:3).

We are to think of an old, old man, his life force long drained and merely a prop for the family to collect alms from pilgrims at The Beautiful Gate. His empty eyes staring hopelessly at the parade of visitors to the Temple mount. He had long ceased to “see” any of them as people.

Just curious, do you assume he wasn’t intelligent or wise? I wonder if he had simply accepted what society had told him about his worth?

There was no hope in the man. Except that of a copper coin that might drop into his palm.

Peter has to say Look at us.

I don’t know about you but at my house we battle covid-brain. After a while you just become sort of stunned and foggy in the isolation and sameness.

As to his healing, of course it was amazing. 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 (Acts 3:6),

It is so charming. He rose up walking and leaping and praising God and, charmingly, he clung to Peter and John (vs 11). Krateō, it means to hold fast with the hand so as to not be separated. It is the same word in this phrase by Paul …hold fast to the head, from whom the whole bod, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God (Col 2:19).

As they proceeded into Solomon’s Portico, Peter addressed the crowd saying it was not their own power that healed the man but …by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, who you see and know and the faith that is through Jesus has given this perfect health in the presence of you all.***[[3]](#endnote-3)***

The scene may well have called to mind for the First Followers the day of restoration, as in Micah 4:5-6, in “the days to come” when “all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of Lord our God forever and forever…” of the lame it says, “I will assemble the lame…. I will make the lame a remnant.”

Jesus said you ought to invite the lame to dinner, not all the most important people of the city (Lk 14:13, 21).

Jesus said to the messengers of John, tell him the lame walk! (Lk 7:22)

**From the Text**

The miracle of this man’s healing is wonderful, yes. But if you think this is like the introduction of a *deus ex machina* into a piece of bad literature, a miracle that pops up out of nowhere, you would be missing the point that has been building for years in Jesus’ life. It was always to be about death and resurrection, and this event is simply an echo resonating in that zone. The resurrection power spilling out onto the steps of the Beautiful Gate; echoes of life in the resurrection zone. The man’s physical redemption has deep roots in our story and not at all surprising.

But that isn’t what I want us to look at. We said we are looking at the ordinary lives of ordinary people. So let’s stay with that.

This man’s life was defined by his congenital illness. The mercy of God visited him that day at the Beautiful Gate, and we see the power of God in that.

But the lesson is much, much deeper than a miracle. The meaning of the story resides not in the last few glorious days or years of this ordinary man, but in the quietude and suffering of the first 40 years.

“Yahweh alone is the lord of sickness and of healing. That is the unbroken biblical assurance… Whether human prescriptions and applications also help or not, what is always essential is that the invalid in his sickness and the convalescent in his recovery should encounter God…” and know his comfort (H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, p. 147).

The meaning of this story isn’t about the miracle, it is about the presence of God in this man’s life for the forty years previous to that moment.

The reality of this man’s life was that God was with him every day of his physically broken life. The lesson here isn’t about being freed from sickness. It’s about encountering God in sickness and even in death. The God who raises the man up in joy and dancing is the God who sat quietly at his side for 40 years. There is no difference.

“It is a matter for the person involved whether he comes through this particular experience with Yahweh and absorbs it permanently into his life” (*AOT*, p. 147). Sometimes our job is to absorb our burden with dignity and faith, and walk therein.

My thoughts are often with a friend in Calgary, who as a successful professional, beautiful family man, a good man loved by his friends and living a productive life, hit a pot hole on his bike on the way home from work and is now quadriplegic.

When I think of him I don’t pray for his healing. He isn’t going to recover physically. That isn’t real life.

I pray that he will be able to absorb his loss, and that he will find welling up within him a sense of the God who is with, him a sense of a God who understands his loss, and that he may encounter God in the stillness of his body, along this tragic blind corner that he travels.[[4]](#endnote-4)

No, it is not in our bodies that we stand up, leaping and praising God. It is in our hearts we stand up, leaping and praising God… no matter the circumstance, celebrating the perfect health of the soul available to us all in Christ. A fact more impressive than any miracle.

And by faith in his name, Peter told the crowd that day, his name itself has made this man strong, who you see and know and the faith that is through Jesus has given this perfect health in the presence of you all.

If only we hold fast to the head.

1. There is also a very distinct geographic structure to Acts that moves from its centre in Jerusalem to Syria, to Asia Minor, to Greece and finally to Rome. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Paul likewise heals a man “who had been crippled by birth” (Acts 14:8). Similar to the Peter story, the people who witnessed the miracle acclaimed Paul as one of the gods who had come down in human form. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Next week we will talk about Annas the High Priest, and as he interrogates Peter and John about this incident, the old man still stands at their side. I think maybe they couldn’t quite convince the old fellow that this was real and that it was okay to go home.

   Annas looks at Peter and John, and then he looks at the old man, and then back at Peter and John (Acts 4:14). And they had nothing to say in opposition but I know what Annas was thinking… “Oy veh! I wanted all this to go away!”

   And the old man stands there in the very presence of the High Priest, his face beaming and defiant, shows the joy of life that he had spent his whole life dreaming about. It must have seemed like a vision! [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. We spent the first five weeks of the year thinking about Job. Here we think again of Job, who, in his own illnesses never received answers or justifications from God, who ultimately could only sit in humility and penance before the unsearchable wisdom of God, absorbing his burdens and trying to know God.

   As we looked, in vain actually, at a theology of suffering per se, I wonder why we don’t have a theology of disability and disease. Surely we live with these limitations, and we must find God in our experience of them. We need a theology of disability and disease, but it cannot be written by those of us who are well. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)