

Acts 3:12-19

15.04.18

*The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*

It's now two weeks since Easter Day, when we joined two bewildered and terrified women at an empty tomb in a garden, and we now pick up the story some weeks later as the ripples of Christ's resurrection are spreading out and causing turmoil in the city of Jerusalem. In the verses prior to our reading a lame beggar has been the latest person to be impacted by Jesus' resurrection. Carried to his usual place on the edge of the temple precincts he had settled down for a day's begging, as was his custom, a day of mixed fortunes with people tossing either coins or curses in his direction. On this day, however, this man had received more than had bargained for. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, recently raised from the dead, he had been summoned by the disciple Peter to rise up— to rise up in the power of the risen Lord. And suddenly he is leaping and dancing in the temple, an area previously forbidden to the lame like him.

And that is where our reading picks up the story. A huge crowd gathers at the site of the miracle. They are astonished at what had happened. They know this lame beggar, they are familiar with the sight of him being carried around and now they want some explanation for what has happened. What's going on? And I love Peter's reaction here. Diplomacy and tact are not his strong points. No attempt to curry favour with the crowd, no effort to endear himself to them – Peter lays into them. His message is simple: firstly, don't think you had anything to do with this man's healing. Don't think it reflects well on you because actually you are on the wrong side, opponents of God and God's purposes. And I'm struck by the very accusatory use of the word 'you' in Peter's speech: 'You Israelites', says Peter, 'why do you wonder at this? Why do you stare at us...?' And then he goes on to implicate these people directly in the death of Jesus – Jesus who 'you handed over... 'and you rejected...' 'You killed the author of Life...' says Peter. You, you, you! Peter does not soft-pedal the message here. He gives it to them straight. You Israelites, you Jews are responsible for what happened! Faced with the author of Life, you handed him over to death.

Now, this is a dangerous passage. It's been used through the centuries as a pretext for a vicious anti-Semitism, with the Jews being called 'Christ killers' and persecuted as a result. Peter's 'you' – 'you handed over...', 'you rejected...', 'you killed...' - this seems to render the Jews responsible for the terrible evil of Christ's crucifixion and they have suffered for it dreadfully. But what this fails to recognise is that the Jewish people here represent the human race. 'You', the Jews, are 'we', the human race. 'They' are 'us'. And what we see in them therefore is ourselves. The Jews, with their unique place in God's purposes, hold up a mirror to the human race, so that their opposition to the author of Life simply discloses our opposition – we are no different from them. So there is no place here for anti-Semitism. But what is interesting about this passage is what it reveals to us about sin: what it displays about this condition that the Bible calls sin and that afflicts us all as human beings, wreaking such havoc upon the world and diminishing us as human beings. In the crucifixion of Christ we see revealed the full extent of human sin, that supreme moment when the human creature rises up against its creator and rejects him and banishes him to a cross. And as Peter reflects upon all that here he gives interesting insights into sin that I would draw our attention to.

Firstly, speaking of Christ's execution, Peter says in verse 17, 'I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your rulers.' In other words sin is sometimes due to ignorance, because we are either too unformed or too stupid to do right. Sin is not always calculated wrongdoing – as with the Jews and their treatment of Jesus it can be just a case of ignorance. We do wrong because we do not have the wisdom or the insight or the understanding to do what is right. So the Jews crucified Christ because they just didn't 'get' that he was God's anointed, God's Messiah. They were ignorant.

If that is one face of sin, however, it can also be more wilfully evil, more malign, more malicious than that. And so Peter also accuses the Jews here of rejecting Christ despite the fact that Pilate was determined to release him. And so, says Peter, you have killed the Author of life. And Peter is pointing here to something deeply embedded in the human constitution, something layered in the human soul that is deeply antagonistic to God and to Life and that is in thrall to death. This is

something more malign than ignorance. This is something more disturbing, something that cannot be cured simply by education and understanding and enlightenment. This needs a more drastic remedy.

Sin therefore is a complex phenomenon. It embraces human ignorance and stupidity and folly, but it is also something deeper and harder to deal with. It's that tendency of the human spirit to resist God, to oppose the Author of life and to be attracted instead by the power of death like a moth to a flame.

All of which is a good pretext to consider our world on this 15<sup>th</sup> day of April 2018 and the reality of sin in all its complexity. And we would be failing as a church this morning if we did not acknowledge that as we gather here a vast armada of ships and planes and fearsome weaponry is within reach of Syria, and missiles have been fired and suddenly there looms a possible showdown between two of our planet's great nuclear superpowers. And we have no clue where this is going or the likely outcome. How far are we prepared to go, and what will the consequences be? Is this the return of the Cold War? The American president has declared 'Mission Accomplished', a very unfortunate phrase given that a previous President declared that not so long ago after military intervention that unleashed conflicts that still reverberate horrifically around the world today. And the manner in which this conflict is being conducted defies belief. The late American poet and jazz musician Gil Scott Heron had a rap song called 'The Revolution will not be Televised.' He was talking about the race revolution and his point was that when it came it would be too serious, too significant, too world-transforming to be reduced to the banality of television coverage with its commercial breaks and media gloss. Well, it seems that when World War III breaks out it will be announced on Twitter, its progress chronicled by Tweet. How on earth have we got to this? Here we are, like the Jews on that day in Jerusalem, exposed in our sin and stupidity and our estrangement from the things that work for peace. And if as a church we cannot look at our world this morning and talk of sin and acknowledge it and confess it then we have nothing to say.

There is however, more to this passage than such a stark message, for there is also hope. And here we focus in on another verse in our reading, verse 13 where Peter says, 'The God of Abraham, the God of

Isaac and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus'. And it is very important that Peter refers her to 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob'. You see, that phrase was forever associated in Jewish minds with one event in their history. It was when the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, oppressed and without hope, and God appeared to a man called Moses and said, 'I am the God of... Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob – and that God proceeded to do something completely unexpected as heard the cries of the slaves and set them free. In other words this is a God who breaks into hopeless situations and does something new, a God who injects deliverance, salvation, new life where death seems dominant. And when in later years the Jews were languishing in exile in Babylon the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did something new and led them out in the most unexpected way. And when human perversity had reached a peak and the Jews had handed Jesus over to be crucified the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob intervened and did something new by raising him from the grave. And Peter is telling the Jews here in Jerusalem that their perversity, their stupidity, their sin need not be the last word, because God is once again doing something new. And what must they do? What must the Jews do? Well, they must repent – verse 19: 'Repent, therefore, and turn to God...!' Turn to the one in whom newness becomes possible, new beginnings, new starts. God is bigger than Israel's sins. God is endlessly creative. God is always looking for ways to do something new in situations that have become dead-end and hopeless, or spoiled or messed up due to our ignorance or our perversity. So turn to him!

Here, surely, is where this passage hits us this morning. Maybe it's the depressing scenario unfolding in the middle east, so tediously repetitive of where we've been before. But we look to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob who is big enough to bring something new and creative out of human sin and stupidity, and we pray accordingly. Or maybe it's closer to home. Forget the international stage and come close. God's Word tells us that we are all sinners. We are all that strange mixture of ignorance and stupidity - but also sometimes something more malign, capable as we are of being deeply resistant to the Author of life and his ways. And so we come here with our lives scarred by that strange concoction that we call sin, that complex mix that put Christ on the cross. And deep within we

harbor regrets, and shame – hurts that we have experienced and hurts that we have inflicted upon others. And we feel sometimes that we are condemned to be held in thrall to things we cannot undo, and our lives are diminished as a result. Well, here is good news for you. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob... glorified Jesus by releasing him from his tomb. And the same God released that lame man in the temple precincts and brought newness to his life. And the same God offered new life to those Jews who had killed the Author of Life. And he offers the same to us, sinners that we are. Hallelujah and amen

Holy, gracious, merciful and loving God,  
we praise and bless your holy name!  
We worship you the God who brought back from the dead  
the Lord Jesus Christ;  
and we praise you whose resurrection power  
was let loose in the lives of the disciples,  
and on the streets of Jerusalem in the days  
that followed his rising.  
We praise you for lives touched,  
for new life given;  
we praise you for crowds demanding explanations for  
things that were happening in the name of the risen Lord,  
crowds who were themselves partly responsible for  
the death of your Son Jesus.

O God, we see ourselves in those crowds.  
We see ourselves in those who rejected your Christ,  
those who opposed your ways, and resisted your truth,  
and who were responsible for killing the Author of life.  
O God we acknowledge and we confess our sins  
and we look to you for forgiveness and for new life.

We praise you that you came in Christ, who suffered  
and rose from the grave, not to condemn us but to save us  
and to bring newness to our old and tired world.  
So come, Lord Jesus, and raise us up to new life.  
And we pray in your name and in the words that you  
Taught us, saying together...