

On Easter day we looked at what it might mean to “believe in vain”, a possibility suggested by Paul’s discussion of the resurrection of Jesus. One of the challenges we feel as we hear of the events at the heart of the Christian story is that of “making sense” of what is said to have happened. On Easter day we looked at what it might mean to “make sense” of the resurrection – what it might cost or require of us. Yet, while the desire to make sense is a natural one, we have to recognise its limitations. This is not to say that we ought to allow ourselves to be “unsensible” or irrational. It is more a question of what makes sense of what. We will naturally seek to make sense of these stories and statements. What we might not consider as a possibility, and yet what will in fact bring us closer to the heart of Christian experience, is whether it might be more important that these biblical texts might actually “make sense” of us. For without that second move we will discover nothing about God, ourselves or the world which we don’t already know, and that ought to terrify us.

The story of the lame man in our Acts reading today catches our attention for two reasons. First we are, still today, used to hearing stories of miracles which are purported to have happened. and we still have to make decisions one way or another as reports of miracles trickle through from here and there. “Miracles happen” declares a bumper-sticker you can see around the place. It doesn’t matter what you or I personally make of the ongoing interest in miracles; the point is simply that we are not, as a whole, really quite over the *idea* of miracles. And so we have to take a stance in relation to stories like the one we’ve heard today – for or against.

The second reason the story the healing of the lame man catches our attention is that we are ourselves, or those dear to us are, variously lame, ill, disabled or limited, and so on. We have, then, an interest in the healing of the lame man, “interest” here in the sense of an investment or involvement, perhaps even in a way that the story of the resurrection of Jesus does not quite seem to interest or involve us. We would, all of us, that someone might enter our lives and declare, “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!” Even if we’re not able to believe it, or not sure that we’re able to, this is a story we *want* to believe. It is the happy ending against incredible odds which has justified a thousand movies. Part of the sense we make of the text is at least our resonance with the desire

for what it seems to speak of in the healing of the lame man, whether or not we finally actually believe that such healing might be possible.

Now, there’s one other thing to be said about what sense we make of this reading. I suspect that, whether we believe the miracle possible or not, our belief or unbelief about the story verges on seeing something “magical” happening here. I don’t mean this in the romantic sense of a “magical evening” of entertainment or love, but rather more literally: what Peter seems to do here is practice a *kind* of magic. The practice of magic has to do with the possession of a certain kind of knowledge about the way the world works and so how it might be manipulated. If you know the right incantation, and say it in the right kind of way, then what you desire will occur. and so, in the Harry Potter stories for example, the young witches and wizards are gradually inducted into what we might call “the mysteries” of their craft – the words which must be said, and the way in which they must be said. e see them struggle to get their Latin phrases right, and to wave their arm in the right way, in order to make happen whatever the “spell” is supposed to effect. The word or “spell” which matters in our story today is the name “Jesus”. It is “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” that Peter commands the crippled man to stand, and it is in the use of the *name* of Jesus that there might be seen a tendency towards magic. On this understanding, Peter – as the insider, the apostle, the one appointed by Jesus – knows the “magical” word, and he utters it, and the lame man is healed.¹

Now, in fact, neither Peter nor Luke are interested in magic. If there is a tendency towards a magical interpretation of what happens here it is in *us* and not in the story that this happens. But we must recognise that it may be, or probably is, in us – whether we believe the story or not. We tend towards hearing of this miracle as an invitation to believe in magic. For those of us who do believe, such a magical understanding appears in us when we find ourselves wondering whether, if only we knew the right words to pray, and if we prayed them with an appropriate air of authority or with right degree of sincerity, or with the right amount of faith, or if we could find someone else who can

¹ A little later a magician named Simon actually offers to pay the apostles if they’ll teach him the “magical” gesture by which the Holy Spirit was imparted to new believers (Acts 8.9-23).

do that for us, we too might experience what Peter and the lame man experienced.

We're thinking about how we make sense of a story like this, and I suggest that such a text, heard by us in our context, evokes these kinds of thoughts and assumptions and desires. Whether we reject them or accept them, the critical point is that it's hard not to imagine that this is what the story *wants* to be about.

Now, to approach the alternate possibility in our hearing of texts like these – the question of what sense the text might make of us – we have to look more closely at what is *actually* happening in the story, and not what might seem to us to be happening. For if we have been distracted by the miracle story, there is a surprise to be had. Whereas our interest in the story is most likely to stem from the possibility that we too might share in such a healing, Peter is interested to communicate the possibility of the forgiveness of sin. There is no implied promise here of the healing of our bodies; the healing of the lame man is almost incidental to point of the passage (which, given how it catches our attention, seems an extraordinary thing!). Peter declares not, "Repent and turn to God so that you may all walk again, or see again, or stand up straight again, or be healed of your leprosy", but "Repent ... and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out." The big news in the story is not that God acts in the name of Jesus to enable a lame man to walk again, but that God acts in the name of Jesus to forgive sin.

It is important to notice how the introduction of the charge of sin disrupts the magical reading of the story, because magical thinking – the desire simply to make this happen or to stop that from happening – is not just about what we can *do* but also about how we *understand* ourselves. In particular, to want magically to change things by knowing how to do the stuff just right, is to demonstrate that we don't think ourselves really to be part of our own problems. Magic doesn't change *us* but rather changes others or the world; it is a tool in our hands for shaping what is outside of us.

But there is a different order in Peter's preaching and with the charge of sin, he opens up a very different thought about what ails us. When he tosses the charge of sin into the mix he opens up the question of whether we need to be changed, the question of what (new) sense needs to be made of us. To be guilty of sin is to have a share in the reason for what is wrong. "Sin" as an idea, gathers *us* into the problem, making us a part of the problem.

Now, this is *not* to suggest that the particular things we might suffer from and would like be able to wave a magic wand over are the result of our personal sin. There is no suggestion that the

lame man was guilty of anything, which led to his condition. In fact there is not time this morning to say much more about the sin Peter points towards, or how it is related to the healing of the lame man, except that the specific charge was both seriously made by Peter, and came as quite a surprise to those to whom it was directed. Next week's reading from Acts will give some scope for more thought about that, and it will have to wait until then. It is enough today simply to note the unexpected turn the story takes in its shift from the spectacular healing to talk of sin and forgiveness, and in the way this turn would shift us from *our* interest in changing the world to *God's* interest in changing us.

We need today to note only that this is a bigger shift than we might think. It is as difficult to believe that I might need real change as it is that it might possible for a lame man to walk again or, for that matter, it is as difficult to learn and understand what might need to be done in me as it is for a dead man to stop being dead. It is much easier to make sense of something – to know it on our own terms – than it is to be made sense of – to know ourselves on another's terms, especially if that "other" is one whose knowledge of us cannot simply be dismissed. Yet to proclaim Jesus as risen is not to believe in magical things; it is to declare ourselves to be under judgement and yet, miraculously, it is to declare also that we are within reach of forgiveness by the sheer grace of the one who brings the charges against us.

There is a gift given here. Yet it is one we weren't expecting, which meets a need we didn't know we had. I suggested at the start that if we're not prepared to allow the biblical text to make some sort of sense of us – prepared to allow it to reveal to us how we think and what we truly desire – then in reading it we learn nothing more than what we already know about ourselves and God. This scarcely makes it worth the trouble.

It is only when we let the story speak to us of things we don't yet know that a re-thinking – literally a "repentance" – becomes a real and close possibility, and with it a life lived with new vigour and hope.

This is what the people of God truly desire.

It is what the gospel of the risen, crucified one makes possible.

By the grace of God, may all his people find themselves caught up into the life which is his gift lovingly given, and give him all right praise. Amen.