

SERMON NOTES: SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EASTER: April 26th, 2009.
Acts 3:13-19; Luke 24:35-48

Acts 3:13-19

This is one of the great speeches of Peter to the Post Pentecost community. He begins it with a title for God that comes from the story of the bush. This is an important way Luke uses to bring the story of Jesus into the story of the great acts of God for the people of Israel. In Jesus, God is bringing to completion works that began back with the call of Abraham. Chapter three began with the story of the cure of the crippled man and what Luke wants his listeners to understand is that the man was cured because God has glorified Jesus and it is the Jesus enthroned at the right hand of the Father who is giving power to the Church. They should thus have great confidence in responding with a life of faith.

Notice how he links the glorification of Jesus with his earlier humiliation at the hands of the Jewish authorities who handed him over to Pilate. Those same people who delivered Jesus to be crucified also claim to be children of their father Abraham. The language that is used here is language that is also found in the story of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52 (52:13-53:12) thus linking Jesus suffering with his glorification. It is also strikingly similar to the language used by the voice that comes from heaven at Jesus' baptism. Jesus is the Servant of God. He is highly favoured by God and the ministry he carries out is performed in the service of God his Father, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. How then could the leaders of the Jewish people get it so wrong?

One of the important things in this reading is that Peter does not excuse the people of Israel for their part in the crucifixion of Jesus. They allowed the priests and Pharisees to carry out their evil plans. They were at best silent and sitting in the middle of the conflict or they were at worst, complicit in the persecution of this Just Man of God. There is no excuse offered to them for their willingness to allow the betrayal and crucifixion to take place. Peter points out that Pilate offered to release to them their King but they renounced their King and chose instead a murderer. They put to death the Author of life and spared the life of a murderer!

Yet, it was this crucified one who was raised from the dead and glorified by God. Now it is through the name of this risen and glorified Son that people are saved and the crippled man is cured of his illness. If they had any doubt as to the power of the Name of the Risen Lord, they should just look at the healed man before them. Each time they see him walking around the city of Jerusalem, they should be reminded of the loving power of Jesus. It was the man's faith in the Risen Lord that cured him and similarly, it is faith in the power of the same Risen Lord that releases healing power into the Church of every age. But for Luke it is clear. The Name of Jesus has no magical powers. It is faith in the person behind the name that brings power.

Peter then goes on to provide an opportunity of reconciliation for the leaders of the Jews and the people of God. He says their priests acted out of ignorance, just as they had. If however, they take the opportunity of being reconciled then they will be set free from the guilt of their sins. This is what the death of the Lord means for them: they are set free and they are called to live in that divinely given freedom. The choice is theirs. As one commentator puts it: *Here is the proclamation of a divine amnesty, offering a free pardon to all who took part in Jesus' death, if only they acknowledge their error, confess their sin and turn to God in repentance.*

This, of course is the key to understanding today's reading for our own lives as disciples of Christ. All that we need to do to avail ourselves of the saving power of God is to change the way we are living. This needs to happen as individual believers and as communities of

believers. As a Church we need to be more authentic and as servants of God we need to be more faithful to the path set out for us in the Gospels. Our attitudes must be in line with God's attitudes. Our way of looking at things and people, brought into accord with the way God in Christ looks at people and behaves towards them. Our attitude to the sins and failings of others (and ourselves) brought into accord with the way God responds to the sins of his children. After all, it was while we were still sinners that God sent his only beloved Son. If he can do that, there is no excuse for us persisting in our stubbornness and sinfulness.

Luke 24:35-48

We have in today's Gospel a third appearance of the Risen Lord and the components of the story are familiar to us from the Emmaus story. We have Jesus appearing but not being recognized. There is a teaching from Scripture given by Jesus in which he points out how his death and resurrection had been spelled out in the story of God's dealings with Israel in the past. Then there is a feeding in which Jesus takes part and a departure. So what we are dealing with in this text is probably one of the very early traditions about the Risen Jesus that had been collected, retold and had probably become part of their liturgical celebrations.

There are lots of similarities between the story of the appearance of Jesus in John 20 and his appearance here in Luke but one of the great differences is that in John the disciples rejoice in seeing their Lord Risen and among them. Here in Luke they are terrified. They doubt what they see and while they are eventually filled with joy, they continue to doubt what they have experienced. We are left with the feeling that Luke's disciples would love to believe that Jesus rose from the dead but just struggle with their human doubts.

This is why Luke spells out the way they need to deal with their doubt. He invites them to look upon his wounds, like Thomas being invited to put his hands in the nail holes. He also invites them to eat with him: "Do you have anything to eat?" Jesus asks them. This is about understanding that Jesus is very much with them. He IS risen and it is only their unwillingness to believe that is holding them back. Where are they to look for him? Within their community. His risen nature is still very much attuned to their own lives in that he is hungry and wants to eat something. This Risen Lord is no so far removed from their own lives that they are unable to relate directly to him. He is still the Son of God who took on our humanity and it is that incarnated Son of God who stands before them as their Risen Lord. What a relief that is...if only they can believe. Jesus is still accessible. He is still with them. He is, in a very real way, one of them and where he has gone, they too can follow.

Then there is the teaching of the Scriptures. Coming to know Jesus is a result of their exploration of what God has revealed to them. It is a gift of faith that is offered to them by God and he does this primarily through the Scriptures. The Bible is a gift of God for the Church, it is the Church's Book of Life and it is in the context of the faith community that its power can be experienced and understood. The Bible only exists within the Church and without this Church context it is nothing more than a pious book of helpful sayings and wonderful stories.

It is the end of this story that brings us to its message for our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ today. This text spells out the role of the Church in every generation until the Lord returns again in glory. In the name of Jesus Christ we are sent to bring the good news that in the name of Jesus our sins are forgiven. This is God's mission for Jesus and now we see that the disciples are caught up in this same mission. It did not end when Jesus died on the cross. It continues in the Church. We have no other reason for being called into existence, no other more important role to play in creation. We are to be bearers of God's reconciliation and healing forgiveness, his merciful love for all people, even those who killed his Son.

This we do through our preaching and teaching and more importantly, by our own lives of healing and forgiveness. We are to witness to God's merciful love by giving people an experience of that Divine forgiveness by the way we deal with each other and the world around us. As Jesus says, "You are my witnesses to this"! God has forgiven you and reconciled you to himself and so we are sent to show this and bring this to the world.

Conclusion:

Peter in his sermon boldly confronted the people of the City with their sinfulness. He pointed out their sins and failings but reassured them that in Christ they were already forgiven by God. They could begin anew. All they had to do was to do something about changing the way they lived and acted. If they would only repent they would know the blessings that came with faith in the Risen Lord. For that is what is needed to be exposed to the saving power of the Name of Jesus. As the crippled man was healed by faith in the Lord, so we can also be set free from what holds us back, what holds us down, what causes us to hobble through our daily lives, if only we dare to believe.

The second message flows on from this. The Risen Lord appears to the disciples and offers them the one thing they cannot have through their own power: "Peace be with you". It is given to them then and there on the spot. In Jesus is their Peace. There is no guarantee that Peace will come only when Jerusalem has been subdued, the Priests and Pharisees removed and the soldiers of Rome sent off in retreat. No. There, in the midst of the evil that resulted in his own crucifixion, Jesus offers his disciples the gift of Peace. This same gift is offered to us, a gift of Peace that will set us free from worries and concerns, which lifts us up to a different level of understanding of our own lives and fills us with the zeal we need to take this gift out to a needy world.

It is all there for us and the power we need to make it a reality is given to us from heaven. It is not about us, it is about the Holy Spirit and our willingness to submit ourselves to him. Only God can achieve what we human beings cannot achieve through war, through politics, through commerce or even through good will. The choice is entirely ours and it is all a matter of just how much of our lives we are prepared to submit to a life of faith.