

Tradition has it that the author of Luke and Acts was a doctor. There are certain medical terms he uses in each book that suggest a close appreciation for ancient science. Whether Luke was a doctor or not, the undisputable fact is that he recorded in detail many healing miracles, first of Jesus and then of the early church. It is the first healing miracle in Acts that we now turn, as we read verse by verse from Acts 3.

**One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon.
(Acts 3:1)**

Earlier this year I was standing on Mount Zion in the Old City of Jerusalem. It was dusk, and as our group took in the sites looking south and east towards Jericho, the other-worldly sounds of dozens of local mosques blaring out the evening call to prayer for Muslim believers filled the air. Islam is a faith of strictly observed traditions like this. And so was the Jewish faith practiced in Jesus' day.

For observant Jews there were set hours of daily prayer; in the mornings at 9am and in the afternoon at 3pm. Peter and John were men from Galilee – a region recognized for its strict adherence to Jewish faith and tradition. And so we find them going to the temple for afternoon prayer. Last week we read Luke's account of the Jerusalem church gathering in the temple courts daily. This daily practice and what we now read of Peter and John's afternoon prayer reminds us that the Christian faith we celebrate grew out of Jewish soil and roots. In fact the early church, especially in Jerusalem, continued to practice Jewish traditions for many years.

The other thing to observe in this opening verse is that Luke names two disciples, reminiscent of Jesus sending the disciples out two by two as they ministered in the Galilean countryside some years before.

Let's read on.

**Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money.
(Acts 3:2-3)**

Peter and John encounter a man crippled from birth. Literally translated, the man was 'lame from the womb.' Clearly the man suffered a significant disability. With this came even more social stigma and exclusion than people with disabilities endure today.

It was a common belief that a person with a disability was cursed; that their affliction was a result of their sin or the sin of their parents. When they encountered a blind man, Jesus' disciples had asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' (John 9:2)

The man Peter and John encountered was at the temple gates for a reason; he could go no further. The law prohibited any person or animal with a defect from entering the temple precincts. The man was excluded from the religious heart of his culture. He was to be pitied.

It was far worse in the broader Greco-Roman culture. Aristotle advised getting rid of a child if it was imperfect and Greek law dictated that a baby was not really a child until seven days after birth so that an imperfect child could be disposed of with a clear conscience.

The crippled man's only means of living was to beg and the gate by the temple was a strategic place to do so. Giving alms to beggars was encouraged by tradition as similar to making an offering to God. There was also a belief in a form of karma – that those who give to beggars would receive some sort of favor as a result.

Let's read on.

**Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.
(Acts 3:4-5)**

Luke builds the dramatic tension brilliantly. He slows the pace. Peter and John do not drop coins into the man's outstretched hand, instead they offer him something far more valuable – their undivided attention. In doing so, Peter and John, in the power of the Holy Spirit, continued in the steps of Jesus; they made the person invisible in so many ways visible again. Jesus was known as a 'friend of sinners' – the outcasts, the marginalized, the forgotten and the cursed. Those pushed to the margins, Jesus brought back to the centre. And here John and Peter do the same.

Of course we live in far more enlightened times. Don't we? I'm not so sure.

People with disabilities still suffer discrimination and marginalization in large and small ways. Family members who care for them selflessly are valued little and struggle for adequate support. As a community we have a long way to go.

But we also celebrate the transformation God is bringing. Our Crossroads congregation, which meets here on Friday mornings, is a vision after Jesus' heart. Every Friday 50 or 60 of you from Sunday church give people with disabilities one of the greatest gifts you can offer – your time and your attention – and with it, your compassion and love. This is ministry offered through the Holy Spirit.

Crossroads is not a ministry of our church. Crossroads is church - here at Robina and at Helensvale. Through God's gift of Crossroads we are reminded that the church is only the church when it is good news to the poor, and I would add, good news to those who are otherwise pushed aside.

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. (Acts 3:6-8)

At first glance, Peter has nothing to offer. He has voluntarily embraced poverty and so has no loose coins to drop into the man's hands. In a world full of desperate people with desperate needs we can easily feel overwhelmed. We can readily think we have nothing to offer – that people's problems, even our problems, are insurmountable. But despite their poverty, Peter and John were still able to be generous to the beggar. In fact, I would go a step further in saying that in their poverty they offered the only thing of any value they had – their relationship with God. As a follower of Jesus like Peter and John, do not underestimate what you have to offer those in distress.

And so in the name of Jesus Peter commands the crippled man to walk for the first time. In invoking the name of Jesus, Peter was not using some magical formula – this was not an ancient version of 'abracadabra'. By invoking Jesus' name, Peter was naming that Jesus was present and available to meet the man's needs. Peter does not heal the man; Jesus does through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The man does not immediately respond to the invitation to walk. Who could blame him? Peter extends his hand to help him up. This was not an act of unbelief – Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, knew God was performing a miracle. Peter's helping hand was a hand of love and compassion. The miracle was God's work, but God's work through Peter. Said another way, the power was Christ's, but the hand was Peter's. (Thomas Walker).

Luke then gives overwhelming evidence to the instant and complete nature of the healing. The man jumps up, walks, leaps and praised God. He who had always been carried was now carrying on joyfully. This was a bone fide miracle.

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. (Acts 3:9-10)

People rubbed their eyes and looked on with astonishment. The man who was dancing a wild, joy-filled jig – could he really be the man they had often tripped over in their rush to temple prayers? As they looked on – with wonder and amazement – their hearts were filled with awe and their brains with questions. The news of the miracle spread through the temple crowd and thousands it seems ran to see with their own eyes and to ask their own questions.

It is into these questions that Peter steps as he preaches the second sermon recorded in Acts. The occurrence of the miracle becomes the foundation on which Peter powerfully tells the gospel story of the one in whose name the miracle had been performed. In the same way Peter preaches out of the Pentecost day experience, he speaks again and thousands more are converted through the dual witness of the miracle of healing and Peter's words – all of it performed in the power of the Holy Spirit.

New Testament scholar Darrell Bock says that a miracle is a visual act that points to a deeper reality.

Another way the bible describes miracles is as 'signs and wonders'.

The healing of the man crippled since birth was a sign that pointed to two realities, realities that Peter illustrates in his sermon.

First, this sign was a fulfillment.

John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus' public ministry. John was in prison when he heard the rumors of what Jesus was doing – the incredible miracles he was performing and the amazing teaching that gripped the thousands who heard him. John wonders if it really can be that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah – the savior of Israel. And so John the Baptist sends his disciples to Jesus with one vital question:

'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else.' (Matthew 11:3)

Jesus responds with these words:

'Go back to John and report what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news I preached to the poor.' (Matthew 11:4-5)

Simply put, Jesus' credential as the Messiah is proven in large part by the many miracles he performs. In performing these miracles, Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecies that point to the expectation that through the Messiah healing and wholeness will come. One such prophecy is found in Isaiah:

Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. (Isaiah 35:6a)

Jesus instructed John the Baptist's disciples to report back to him what they see and hear. They see the miracles and they hear the good news of the kingdom proclaimed. And so it is with Peter and John. The people see the miracle they perform in the name of Jesus and then hear the good news proclaimed with power. The miracle attracts an attentive and curious crowd and Peter's sermon pointed to the indisputable fact that in the person of Jesus the long-awaited Messiah had come.

Second, this sign was a foretaste.

We live in a food-obsessed culture. This week, nine of the top ten best selling non-fiction books were recipe books, diet books or books about or by celebrity chefs. TV cooking shows rate through the roof. I am no masterchef. I cook a mean stir fry and a decent steak, and that's about it.

But as a kid I loved hanging around my mum when she was cooking, especially when it was biscuits or sponges or cakes. The Mixmaster would come out, and after the batter was prepared – I would get to lick the beaters dry. Yum! I can taste mum's ginger fluff now.

Licking those beaters I got a preview of the better things to come, when the oven timer would ping and the cake came out – ready to be iced and eaten. I had a foretaste.

So it was for those who experienced this miracle, and the other miracles of Jesus and the Acts church. They had a foretaste of better things to come. The Bible tells us that the new kingdom that Jesus inaugurated, the kingdom which the early church proclaimed and which we now preach will one day be consummated fully and completely – when the kingdoms of

this world become the kingdoms of our God and heaven and earth are joined together in a wonderful New Creation. When that happens, we are promised:

God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:4)

The old order is the order of sickness, pain, mourning and death. We live in the time in between. Between the old order that has gripped this world since Adam and Eve, the order of sin and rebellion and its consequences – and the New Order where God's shalom – God's peace – will restore all and everything. One day everything broken will be fixed.

In this world in between, I do not know why God heals some, and does not heal others. I have no answers. All I can do is name and own my grief, and pain and tears and through it all trust the God who in Jesus became our suffering servant.

What does this all mean for us here at Newlife?

We are an Acts 29 church. You are going to hear me say that a lot over the coming months. What does it mean?

Luke's account of the adventures of the early church extends to 28 chapters in the Acts of the Apostles. But the story of the church and the work of the Holy Spirit doesn't end there. It stretches into the remarkable stories of growth and persecution and miracles and failures and revivals and faithful proclamation and martyrs and controversies and mission and sorrow and joy that runs right up to now. Peter and John and those early disciples are our Christian brothers and sisters. The Holy Spirit that awakened faith in them awakened faith in us. And so, compelled and empowered by the Holy Spirit that is the same gift to every believer, we pray with faith and expectation for the sick.

There are many reasons who we might not pray for the sick.

We lack faith to believe that with God all things are possible. We live in modern, scientific world where everything that is true can only be true if it has been reduced down to rational explanations.

We have been embarrassed by the extravagant claims of faith healers past and present and we want to avoid them and their grotesque failure like the plague.

We have been disappointed, devastated even, by seemingly unanswered prayers of the past, and we don't believe we can face such trauma again.

There are many reasons why we might not pray for the sick, but there are two important reasons why we must.

First, this was the ministry Jesus commissioned his disciples to fulfill. We read in Luke:

When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. (Luke 9:1-2)

As Jesus commissioned the twelve, so he commissions his church. And as we see the healing ministry of Jesus occur in our midst, so the potential for faith to be awakened in those who do not yet believe is increased.

Second, this is a ministry that personifies God's compassionate character.

Time and again we read in the gospels that when Jesus encountered the sick and sorrowing, he was moved with compassion. The Greek word translated as compassion in these cases literally means that to be moved in one's bowels. Our first reaction is to recoil. But, in Jewish culture the bowels and intestines were believed to be the seat of a person's tender affections – like love and mercy and pity. When Jesus was moved with compassion he was stirred up with overwhelming love and mercy for those he saw suffering, and that love overflowed into his healing hands.

And so because we are commanded and because God is compassionate we will pray for the sick. We will pray with the faith God gives us. We will pray in the power of the Holy Spirit who equipped Peter and John and who equips us.

And as we pray we dare to believe that God will do new things in our midst:

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! (Isaiah 43:18-19a)