

THE NAME AND POWER OF JESUS

Acts 3. 12-19

1 John 3. 1-7

Luke 24. 36b-48

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

We have two texts this morning which are connected. The first is St Luke's account of our Lord's resurrection appearance to the disciples gathered together in Jerusalem. The second is St Luke's account in Acts, the sequel to his gospel, telling the story of Peter (and John's) witness before the Jewish people. The Israelites are amazed; they have just seen a beggar who was crippled from birth be healed, right before their very eyes at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple.

There is a dynamism that is evident in Jesus's resurrection which Luke, like the other evangelists, notices. While the disciples are talking about Christ's appearances to Simon Peter and others among them, our Lord suddenly appears in their midst. The disciples are startled and frightened, and think that they have seen a ghost. But Jesus was emphatically present. He showed them his hands and his feet; and while they still disbelieved for joy and wonder, he took and ate a piece of broiled fish before them.

Just as emphatic as his personal presence was Christ's word. He opened the disciples' minds to understand the scriptures; that it was necessary for our Lord to suffer, die, and rise again; that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name, beginning in Jerusalem, and reaching to the ends of the earth. And he said to them, 'You are witnesses of these things'.

In the verses that follow our appointed reading for today, we learn that Jesus tells the disciples to stay in the city and wait for the promise of the Father (that is, the Holy Spirit) to descend on them in power. Luke is preparing us for what comes next; and an example of what comes next is given in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. What comes next is an astonishing boldness on the part of the apostles as they speak about Christ, in front of the Jewish people who rejected our Lord. The apostles will show the same boldness before the Jewish high priests, rulers and scribes in a subsequent chapter of Acts. These rulers are the same people whose power had made the disciples cower with fear only a short time earlier.

By what power or by what name were Peter and John able to heal the crippled beggar? Peter is very clear: ‘...by faith in his name. His name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus Christ has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you’.

Just as surely as Christ had stood in the midst of the disciples, saying, ‘Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself’; so now his name and power were in evidence before those who had condemned him to death. You see, Peter, John and the others were now *different people*; they could never be as they were before. They had seen the Lord. He had eaten and drunk with them after his resurrection. The clarity of his victory, his death and resurrection, had filled them with courage and boldness. As they preached and proclaimed the good news, they were simply declaring the truth that they had witnessed.

‘You are witnesses of these things’. You and I who are here today did not have the privilege of personally witnessing the resurrection of Jesus in that Upper Room. But we who believe in him, his incarnation, his death on the Cross and his resurrection know in our hearts that ‘Christ is Lord’. We are linked to him; we are tied to him; and we are people who rejoice in, and proclaim his resurrection.

How do we proclaim his resurrection? We proclaim it first of all every time we participate in the Sacrament of Holy Communion; when we partake of the Body and Blood of our Lord. As others see us ‘feeding on him in our hearts’, we make a powerful statement indeed about his victory.

Secondly, we proclaim his resurrection as we come to support those who are being baptised. In the liturgy of baptism, we recall together the faith of the Church in the resurrection of our Lord; and we pray that those who are baptised will, as part of his pilgrim people, be renewed by the Holy Spirit and come to the inheritance of the saints in glory.

So far, so good. But then many of us will say, ‘Yes, I do that. But I’m no evangelist. I can’t be speaking aloud to people about God. I’m not wired that way’.

I imagine that many of us will have heard a very famous quote, which is ‘Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary’. It is attributed to St Francis of Assisi, the founder of the Franciscan Order. The quote implies that proclaiming the gospel by example is more virtuous than actually proclaiming it with voice.

Interestingly enough, our good Francis never actually said this phrase which has been attributed to him. None of his disciples, and none of his early or later biographers have these words coming from his mouth. Nor does this quote show up in any of his writings. The closest reference to it comes from Francis’s *Rule* written in 1221, in Chapter XII where he states how the Franciscans should practice their preaching. I quote:

‘No brother should preach contrary to the form and regulations of the holy Church nor unless he has been permitted by his minister ... All the Friars ... should preach by their deeds.’

Essentially, what St Francis was saying to his brothers was, ‘Make sure your deeds match your words’; and there was no implication in his *Rule* that words proclaiming the gospel would not be useful or have their place.

Francis’s first biographer, Thomas of Celano, wrote this about Francis’s preaching: ‘His words were neither hollow nor ridiculous, but filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, penetrating the marrow of the heart, so that listeners were turned to great amazement.’ Thomas goes on to say that Francis sometimes preached ‘in up to five villages a day, often outdoors. In the country, Francis often spoke from a bale of straw or a granary doorway. In town, he would climb on a box or up steps in a public building. He preached to . . . any who gathered to hear the strange but fiery little preacher from Assisi.’ According to Thomas, Francis was sometimes so animated and passionate in his delivery that ‘his feet moved as if he were dancing’.

While our deeds will surely speak volumes to other people around us, it has to be said that the proclamation of the gospel is ultimately verbal. It is simply impossible to preach the gospel without words. As St Paul wrote to the church in Rome, ‘But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?’ (10. 14).

May God give us the words and the ability to speak about our faith, when this is necessary and helpful to his purposes. The more we the people of St Stephen’s Church grow into the faith which confesses that Jesus is Lord, the more the power of his resurrection will be experienced in our lives; and the more that power will be in evidence in our worship, fellowship and service.

As Vicar of this church, my constant prayer is that when people enter this glorious church building; when they hear our music, encounter our liturgy, preaching and

teaching; when they engage in our fellowship and activity and meet our members; they will see the reflection of Christ himself. 'Look at my hands and my feet, see that it is I myself.' I ask you to help me with this prayer by confessing with your own lips that Jesus is Lord; and therefore showing that you believe in your own heart that God did indeed raise him from the dead. *Then people will see* that truly by the name and power of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, crucified and risen, St Stephen's Church lives and stands before them on this great island.

Amen.