

4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

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Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler

READ: ACTS 4:5-12

"By what power or by what name did you do this?"

REFLECT:

Do you remember that Sunday School hymn, "Peter and John went to pray, they met a lame man on the way..."? When I was little we used to sing it in school assemblies, and I always misheard/misunderstood that line "he asked for alms" as "he asked for *arms*." Maybe you can imagine a 5-year-old Cara sitting cross-legged on the parquet floor of a hall full of fidgeting kids, frowning in confusion. He asked for arms and held out his palms? How could he hold out his palms if he didn't have any arms??

If you have any amusing examples of your own of misheard hymn lyrics, I'd love to hear them (my sisters and I also used to bounce across the

sofa triumphantly singing "I am the lord of the dance settee," but that's another story...)! What's important here is to know that the context for today's short reading from Acts is that story of Peter and John and the healing of the lame beggar who starts "walking and leaping and praising God" after his miraculous healing. Last week the lectionary offered the spontaneous sermon Peter preached to the crowds who had gathered in amazement at the scene. This week the story continues with Peter and John having been arrested and now being interrogated by the religious elite and temple authorities. For the full story, read from the beginning of Acts chapter 3.

Today's scene is fascinating and full of tension. There's an undercurrent of resurrection appropriate to this Easter season; the interrogators are the same authorities who tried to quash the Jesus movement by his crucifixion. This story attests to the beautiful truth that they have not, after all, put a lid on it. It rises again, joyous and unstoppable as Springtime. Their question about "power" gets to the root of the conflict. They represent the establishment, working with Rome to maintain law and order. Peter and John haven't gone through the proper channels. They serve another authority, Jesus of Nazareth, a power that is still alive and well and at work through the community of believers.

One of the commentators I read points out that to read the book of Acts as anti-establishment is over-simplistic. After all, Peter and John were on their way to pray in the temple when they met the man they healed. There is evidence that the early Church at this point was already becoming organised and structured.

There is still an implicit challenge to our churches in this story though. Structures and routines are helpful, but are we still responsive to the Holy Spirit? Our inheritance of faith should be held with due reverence and care, but are we holding on too tightly to order and control? Are we quietly complicit with society's structural inequality and systemic injustice? Or are we coming into conflict with the authorities for unleashing the liberating power of the Gospel in our communities?

A BLESSING:

This is a mash-up of two blessings written by Janet Morley, words that seem appropriate for today as we seek to live in the light of the resurrection, and begin to venture out into the world once more:

May the God who
shakes heaven and
earth,
whom death could
not contain,
who lives to disturb
and heal us,
bless us and drive us
out with power
to fill the world with
her justice.
Amen.

RESOURCES AND CONTACTS:

Wheatley URC have a huge archive of online sermons you can listen to and are regularly posting new resources on their website:
www.wheatleyurc.org.uk

Pauline and myself, and your elders, are here for you if you need someone to talk to, have a prayer request, or just fancy a chat! Ping us an email or give us a ring.