**Seen, Heard and Empowered. Acts 4 April 25 2021**

During my years as a primary school teacher, particularly on yard duty, I often felt like a detective. A child would approach telling me a story about another child, triggering at times a complex web of questioning and investigation both of those involved in the incident and of the bystanders. I would frequently be asking, “so what did you see?” “What did you hear?” It often took quite some time to get to what had actually been heard and seen.

Peter and John had heard and seen a great deal during their years as Jesus disciples, much of it they did not fully understand, but after Jesus crucifixion and resurrection their minds became further illuminated by the Holy Spirit and their understanding increased.

The passage we have heard follows on directly from what we were thinking about last week. The accusations against Peter and John were the consequence of their involvement in the healing of the lame man and their preaching to the crowds that gathered at this time. The miracle created a platform for them to share their testimony to what they had seen and heard as followers of Jesus.

The healing of this man points back to healings performed by Jesus in the gospels. The word used for healing in the book of Acts *“sozo”* can also be used to mean “saved”. It reminds us of when Jesus healed a paralysed man in Matthew’s gospel and first said to him, “Take heart, your sins are forgiven”[[1]](#footnote-1). Perceiving that the onlookers were questioning his authority to act in this way he says, “For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’?”[[2]](#footnote-2) He then healed the man. Forgiveness brings a form of healing to us all. So Peter likewise brings a message of the need for repentance and the promise of forgiveness to the onlookers in his setting.

This message causes consternation in the religious leaders. Peter’s message continues the message of Jesus, and this was dangerous in the eyes of some of the religious leaders. The people who were listening and responding to this message were likely to be worshippers from the temple. This message could lure them away, at the very least they may develop divided loyalties, and this obviously concerned the religious leaders.

So the religious leaders challenged Peter and John’s authority to act and teach in this way. No doubt this would be an anxious time for Peter and John, would these authorities do to them what had been done to Jesus? Perhaps the words of Jesus came to their minds, “**11**When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+12%3A11-12&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-25463a)] you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; **12**for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The disciples display extraordinary composure. They knew they could use Jesus name because they knew Jesus, they had spent time with him and they knew “what his name expressed and what it could be used for.”[[4]](#footnote-4) They were filled with God’s Spirit and this produced a welling up of inspired speech, just as Jesus had told them. They were in a challenging situation and God’s Spirit was showing them how to respond. I am so grateful to God for those times when I have been in difficult situations and I have been aware of being given, words, insight, confidence or sensitivity that certainly surpassed any of my own natural ability.

This story reminds us that Spiritual authority is the result of the Spirit’s work in the life of the person. Living in companionship with God’s Spirit encompasses leading a life which is subject to spiritual disciplines which makes one more available to the Holy Spirit. Earlier in the book of Acts we read that these followers of Jesus gave significant time to meeting together, prayer and worship these types of practices would encourage them to be more open to the Holy Spirit.

It also reminds us that our natural capabilities, knowledge or skills are insignificant in the context of the ways in which God can use us. These men were described as “uneducated, ordinary men”[[5]](#footnote-5) but the crucial factor was they were “companions of Jesus”.[[6]](#footnote-6) Sometimes in the life of the church we can give too much emphasis to natural abilities, education and skills and miss the vital contribution that people could offer in the power of God’s Spirit.

Our mainline churches in particular have a disproportionate percentage of people with strong academic backgrounds as compared with those who are unemployed or those who work in the “blue collar” sector. This seems to have been an enduring problem in the church. John Wesley faced his own personal reservations, as well as the censure of others, when he began preaching to coal miners and other labourers in the open air. However, these people became the foundation of the emerging movement which became eventually the Methodist church. There remains a great challenge for us today regarding how we connect with people whose lives and experiences may be very different to our own. How we ensure that this church community is a place of welcome and nurture for all.

Putting our skills at God’s disposal is only reasonable as followers of Jesus, but it is only that which is done by God’s Spirit that produces life and growth in the church and draws others into faith in Jesus.

The preaching of Peter from the outset was witness bearing, he was testifying to personal experience and it was born of personal involvement. Their response to the authorities affirms their passion, “It’s impossible for us to stop speaking about all the things we have seen and heard.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Our own stories of why our faith in God is important to us, have great significance in a country where there is a decreasing amount of common knowledge regarding Jesus.

This story reminds us that, “Peter was an ordinary man who did extraordinary things to influence thousands of people because he was “filled with the Holy Spirit””[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. Matthew 9:2 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew 9:5 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Luke 11:12-13 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Acts 4:13b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Acts 4:13c NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John 4:20 The Passion Translation [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” In Leander E. Keck et al (Eds) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,*(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) 92 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)