**What’s in a name? April 18 2021 Acts 3**

In Shakespeare’s play Juliet famously says ”What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet”[[1]](#footnote-1) She appears to be saying that what is important is the nature of the thing or person rather than their name.

Names are however our markers of identity, and in some cultures this is very starkly demonstrated. Names often point not only to families of origin but also to places of origin.

People and groups take actions to “protect their good name”. People continue to use their name to gain credence in certain situations with phrases like “tell them that I recommended you”. A name can carry with it a sense of authority, it points back to all that person is and does. As a Minister I act in the name of the Uniting Church in various contexts, and I am aware that what I do and say reflects on how the Uniting Church is perceived.

The story we read today points to the disciples using the name of Jesus in their interaction with the lame man.

**A New Perspective**

We should recognise that this story is from the very early days of the early Christian movement. The disciples in this story could easily have felt overwhelmed by the changes that had taken place and the challenge of grappling with how these changes needed to inform their understandings of God and Jesus and themselves.

Just a short while ago they were hiding out of fear that they too could be arrested, tried and even crucified. Now they had encountered the risen Jesus! They had grappled with the reality of Jesus resurrection. Then they had grappled with Jesus ascension, and more recently they had experienced Pentecost, they had been miraculously transformed. A new boldness, a new confidence and passion to share their experiences and understanding of Jesus with everyone was now theirs.

The apostles have received the illumination of the Holy Spirit, to help them to understand what Jesus has done, and how that enacts the purposes of God, they have begun to really grasp the task they have been called to.

This is a time of transition, the sermon which follows this incident highlights the journey they were on with its many references to the foundations of their faith in Judaism. The setting of the incident of course was at the temple, with the disciples being there ready to participate in the ritual practices of Judaism through prayer and the evening sacrifices. They were continuing to process the implications of their belief in Jesus as the Messiah, and their monotheistic Jewish beliefs.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The lame man would have been an outsider to the temple worship. Lame from birth, his physical condition would have excluded him from participation in the temple worship. A cloud hung over those with physical, congenital issues, and even over their parents. He was likely scorned, ignored or avoided by others all his life. His healing instantly reverses his situation, he can immediately enter the temple and his exuberant joy exhibits itself in animated joyful worship of God. “[H]e entered the temple with them walking and leaping and praising God.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

His healing and entry into the temple to participate in its worship indicate the change that is happening, the outsiders will find their conditions reversed and they will be able participate in the full blessings of God’s kingdom. The mission that the disciples are called to encompasses inclusivity, they are to take the gospel to anyone and everyone to the ends of the earth. This mission of course remains our mission, just as we “gentiles” have been included in the family of God we take this great message of God’s loving embrace extended to all, into our world, our communities, our neighbourhoods.

**Whose Name?**

However the bystanders were confused. The text says they were “filled with wonder and amazement”.[[4]](#footnote-4) They had observed an astonishing miracle, the man was well known to them, there were many witnesses and the transformation in him was stark. There are repeated references to him walking around and even jumping and leaping.[[5]](#footnote-5) We read that he was given “perfect health in the presence of all”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In their astonishment they rushed towards the man standing with Peter and John. Here Peter takes action, he perceives their confusion and speaks in order to clarify what has happened and how this has occurred. He recognises that there is a need to help the people to make a paradigm shift in their thinking, they need to understand the activity of God in this miracle and how that relates to Jesus. In coming to grips with this miracle they will be coming to grips with who Jesus really is and what he has done.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The healing of the lame man prompts a spontaneous and enthusiastic sermon from Peter through which he testifies to the remarkable and ongoing power of Jesus. It flowed out of an infectious enthusiasm planted within them by the Holy Spirit. This Jesus who healed the sick in his lifetime, is the One in whose name this man has been healed. This points again to the fact that these followers of Jesus no longer see their Master, who had been crucified, as dead. They perceive Jesus as alive and able to continue to heal people. The actions of Peter and John continue to highlight their confidence in Jesus resurrection, and in the fact that the God who raised Jesus from death, is the God who has healed this man.

Peter is quick to point out that he and John are in no way responsible for this miracle, it has nothing to do with their piety, their power, even their faith. He says, “why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?”[[8]](#footnote-8) This is a work of God. He says, “the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Peter’s words show his confidence in the present authority of the living Jesus to heal, and of his own very limited role in the whole process. It is a good reminder for each of us. We may be blessed to witness God at work, we may have a part to play in the work of God through our words and actions, yet it remains a work of God, it is not ours. We are always dependant on God. This is God’s world, God’s church, and we are God’s people, the future of God’s church lays in God’s hands and God gives us the opportunity to be involved.

Peter’s words to the lame man, and his reflections upon this incident, show that Jesus name is far more than just a title, it encompasses the totality of his identity and his actions, it bears his authority. So Peter and John sought the power of God in Jesus to be active in the lame man’s life and to heal his physical limitations. It reminds us that from the earliest days of the Christian church, they operated under the authority of Jesus. Therefore, they gave praise to God for the ways in which they saw God at work in the world, and in this case, for God’s activity in healing this man.

So we too as Christians bear the name of Jesus, we operate under his authority, we are his representatives, we are given the opportunity to be part of what God is doing today.

1. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet,* Act 2, Scene 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James G. D. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles,* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996) 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Acts 3:8b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Acta 3:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Acts 3:8-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Acts 3:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles” in Leander E. Keck et al (Eds) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,*(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) 78-80 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Acts 3:12 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Acts 3:16b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-9)