

I want to focus on two very different aspects of the story about the healing of the crippled man: Firstly, how Peter was a very ordinary person transformed after being filled with the Holy Spirit and secondly, the importance of doing things in Jesus' name.

Peter, as we know, was an uneducated fisherman; very much a hands on type of person; impulsive and, to put it frankly, had let down Jesus when it really mattered. We often read in the gospels that Peter along with the other disciples, just didn't get what Jesus was all about yet, after being filled with Holy Spirit at Pentecost, all of the disciples are transformed. Peter is able to preach profound words of wisdom to hundreds, even thousands of people off the cuff, many of whom would have been highly educated and well versed and grounded in all aspects of religious matters.

In the following chapter, verse 8 we are told Peter was "filled with the Holy Spirit" when he takes to task the Sadducees who want to silence him. An ordinary man who does something, that just a few weeks previously, he would never have dreamt possible.

In just the same way, the Holy Spirit is at work in individuals today, here's a true story I want to share with you.

In the spring of 2003 a vicar was leading a house group. After sharing refreshments and studying a particular bible passage a lively discussion began on serving within a church context. Someone thought a good and practical way to put the theory they were discussing into practice would be to take responsibility for every aspect of a service one Sunday.

There was no formal rota at the church so one person offered to make the coffee; another to hand out hymn books and so on until everyone except the host had volunteered for a role and the only one that seemed to be left was doing the sermon.

The only problem was that the man did not consider himself in the least bit knowledgeable; he had not led even a group discussion at Alpha and was not even leading the house group – the vicar was. Other house groups were led by knowledgeable members of the congregation. He was just a very ordinary man who had listened and learned a little bit here and there from his vicar during the previous three years.

Providing wine and nibbles was one thing; speaking in front of nearly a hundred people who had mostly been attending the church for many years more than he had and were obviously better qualified and knew more about the bible than he did was another matter entirely. To make matters worse, or so he thought, was the fact that it was Palm Sunday that week and everyone would know the story so well, so what on earth could he say that would be of interest?

After a completely sleepless night the big day arrived and he took his place in the pews feeling a nervous wreck. The time came for the man to step up and as he started to talk the gut retching fear and anxiety that had gripped his stomach all morning suddenly disappeared and he felt calm, relaxed and even began to enjoy the experience.

It wasn't the world's greatest sermon by any means but what made that sermon so special that day was the letter he received two days later from a member of the congregation. Amongst many other things she wrote: "I was deeply touched by your sermon – it was very anointed by the Holy Spirit".

I'm sure you all realize by now that I have been speaking about this church; the vicar was David and I was the very ordinary member of the congregation and house group host. And yes, Moya, I still have that letter in my treasured possession box.

Please don't start thinking I am making myself out to be Peter to David's Jesus, even though my father was a fisherman and David is a preacher originally from the north! But the fact is that just like Peter I was a very ordinary person who was blessed by the Holy Spirit.

Peter, was a very ordinary person; an uneducated manual labourer one day but then is able to speak with absolute authority to the biblical scholars of the day and untutored villager alike. During Jesus' ministry Peter would have been with Jesus when he healed people time and again; we heard about the centurion's servant in our gospel reading; he was there when Jesus healed the blind men, the leper and the paralytic who was lowered down into a room by his friends just to mention four instances and he was there when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.

Peter was also one of the 72 who were sent out in pairs to villages and towns with the instruction to heal the sick. But that was when Jesus was alive. Now Jesus has ascended but due to the Spirit; the work of healing still goes on. This is exactly what the risen Jesus had in mind when he walked along the lake shore with Peter after preparing the disciples breakfast and told him to "tend my sheep".

Over the past three years Peter had been beside Jesus but now Jesus was no longer there to guide and support him but Peter had been filled with the Holy Spirit and as consequence this ordinary man continued to do extraordinary things. There are many other examples in Acts which show that this was not just a one off healing; Peter brings Tabitha back to life; he heals Eneas of a palsy and Paul heals a cripple in Lystra to mention just three. In chapter 5 we are told that the Apostles performed many wonders; the Holy Spirit continued to empower in so many different ways.

Back to the reading...Peter and John are just about to enter the Temple for prayers via the beautiful gate when a beggar calls out to them, asking for alms but Peter responds in verse 6 saying he has neither silver or gold; but what he does have he will give to the beggar.

Peter does three things:

he looks eyes with the beggar;

he commands him to walk in the name of Jesus Christ and

he helps the beggar stand and leads him into the temple to pray.

Up till that moment the beggar had led his life at the margins of society. We can only guess how many times he heard "No" before receiving the "Yes" of a coin being dropped onto his mat. Who knows how many times people had avoided eye contact with him and walked straight past him as if he was invisible. We have very few beggars in Sunningdale but hands up anyone who has walked straight past a beggar outside Waterloo station or elsewhere when visiting London? I certainly have, I'm ashamed to say.

Yet now the newly healed man can enter the Temple for the very first time in his life; his crippled state meant he had been prohibited from doing so previously by temple law; now he is restored in one go both physically and socially. That would have been something priceless to that beggar, much more valuable than the coins he was hoping for. We know that because we are told he went into the Temple "walking and jumping and praising God".

Peter healed a crippled beggar; but I have only talked about two of three things he does; looking the beggar in the eye as an individual and helping the beggar to stand to lead him into the Temple. These are important, certainly but the absolutely essential and all embracing third thing that Peter does is command the man to stand "In the name of Jesus Christ". Those six words, "in the name of Jesus Christ" give the authority to what Peter does and says. Peter spoke under the authority of Jesus Christ "Get up". And from

that moment on the beggar's life was changed. It was not Peter who healed the beggar; it was Peter who healed the beggar in Christ's name and that is something entirely different.

So, a second story about the authority that is given "in the name of Jesus Christ"

I have stood here previously and told the story of how I was healed of a chronic asthmatic condition and how I underwent all the proven tests before the surgery nurses and doctor admitted that I had been cured. Today I want to share with you a little more about the moment I was healed.

It was at a Christian conference in South London on what turned out to be the hottest and most asthma inducing day of 2010. The speaker on the platform said he felt that the Holy Spirit wanted to heal someone with a long term respiratory illness; someone who was suffering badly from the illness at that very moment. I was really struggling with my breathing; indeed Jane had suggested only a few minutes earlier that we should leave because I was getting worse and worse. As he spoke he turned to look in my direction and pointed.

Of course I have no way of knowing if he was looking me straight in the eye as Peter did with the beggar or indeed if his finger was pointing at me and me alone but the next thing I knew I was standing next to him on the platform. Actually, getting up there was a struggle; I was wheezing badly.

In front of Jane and a couple of thousand people he then put his hand on my shoulder and said "In the name of Jesus Christ, heal this man's breathing" or something like that. To be honest I can't remember anything after the words "In the name of Jesus Christ" because all I can remember is jumping up and down very much like the beggar.

He asked me if I felt better and I shouted the most prolonged and sustained "YESSSSSSSSSSSS!!" that has ever been shouted. Two minutes earlier I could hardly breath, then there I was almost bragging about how long I could sustain a "yessss"

That folks, was the moment I knew that God heals today; the moment I knew healing happens "In the name of Jesus Christ". Like that beggar, my life was instantly changed.

But let me put a codicil to that story. During the tea break shortly afterwards a man who had been sitting a couple of rows directly behind me and would have been in the line of sight of the pointed finger came up and said how happy he was that I had been healed and how wonderful it was to know God is alive and with us today. He then told me he was a doctor who had suffered from chronic asthma from childhood and he had hoped that the call had been for him but he had not gone forward when he saw that I had.

Apart from feeling somewhat guilty I wasn't quite sure how to respond but now, six years on, I think the difference is that the man said he had always hoped he would be cured but I went up onto that platform expecting to be cured.

OK, my glass is always half full and I can't explain why I was healed and he wasn't just as I can't explain why my former wife wasn't healed of the cancer she died from or why not everyone is healed when prayed for. But I believe that healings show that God's kingdom occasionally breaks through into our world today but not yet fully as it will do one day when all things will be made new; when every tear will be wiped away and there will be no mourning or crying or pain and death will be no more.

But there is something about the story of the beggar which we can grasp today. The beggar, was an ordinary man, who thought he knew the extent of what he could ask for – a few coins – but was surprised to receive so much more. Maybe, just maybe, that doctor had never expected to be healed, only hoped to be healed.

I may be guilty of hair splitting here, but if I said I hope my lottery ticker numbers come up and I expect my lottery numbers to come up, do you see the difference?

So to end, and with pun intended – does healing in the name of Jesus Christ today beggar belief? Or does it enrich belief to expect healing in the name of Jesus Christ?

Do we, like the beggar know the extent of what we can ask for in our prayers?

Do we, like Peter speak under the authority of Jesus Christ?

I know, questions, questions.....but I still stand before you today as an ordinary man but now with the confidence and boldness to speak about my healing because I have grasped the truth, that the Holy Spirit is at work in this world today.

It is that knowledge, that assurance which means I am not afraid either to ask questions or seek the answers.

And for me the answer is always the same.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is freely available if we just reach out in belief.

Amen