

# **Year B**

## **Acts 4:5-12**

A Total Solar Eclipse occurs when the Moon moves between the Sun and the Earth, completely covering the disc of the Sun. When this occurs, the shadow of the Moon is cast onto the Earth along what is called the path of totality. Everyone and everything within that path is plunged into an eerie darkness for a few minutes. You do not see a total eclipse – you experience it. It is very unwise, and in fact, dangerous to one's sight to look directly at the sun. We don't do it

because it is very uncomfortable and we know the dangers anyway. So to see the effects of a solar eclipse safely we must use something like a camera obscura to help us. A closed box with a pin-hole will project the image and the effect can be viewed safely.

The Jews believed it was very unwise and even perilous for any human being to gaze directly upon the being of God. With very few exceptions in their spiritual history, such an encounter with God brought instant death. Yet, the people desired to be with their God and to know him. That relationship could not be experienced at a

distance. What were they to do? Well, the Old Testament describes in detail the religious institution that arose out of this challenge. First, the tabernacle and the priestly class and then the Temple and the monarchy - their fall, and then the resurrection of Temple worship under new priestly leadership - all of which enabled the people to experience God without being consumed. The Temple cult and all its associated paraphernalia was like the camera obscura, a box that allowed the experience to be enjoyed without danger. It could be argued that in much the same way

the Church has functioned like the camera obscura for Christians. Could we really cope with exposure to the almighty God of the universe without the Church? That's the question that is answered in this telling passage in Acts of the Apostles. It's the place and role of the institution in the people's experience of God and the overwhelming power of God's Spirit that comes into sharp relief in the passage from Acts today. Peter and John had been involved in the healing of the man crippled from birth. The onlookers responded with amazement which led Peter to explain how the healing came about - by

faith in Jesus' name. This in turn led to the religious authorities intervening, arresting Peter and John because they were taking on a self-appointed role as teachers and teaching belief in the power of a recently executed heretic. The people clearly needed to be protected from people like Peter and John. The Jewish leaders' first question gave the game away. "By what power or by what name did you do this?" The Jewish leaders saw themselves as those who were permitted to exercise power on behalf of God for the good of the people. Remember the significance of 'the name' in Judaism. The

Temple was unique because there the name of God resided. The Temple authorities acting on behalf of 'the name' felt vindicated to exercise legitimate power. That assumption was brilliantly challenged by Peter.

After the American Civil War the managers of the infamous Louisiana Lottery approached Robert E. Lee, the former leader of the Confederate States, and asked if he'd let them use his name in their scheme. They promised that if he did he would become rich.

Astounded, Lee straightened up, buttoned his grey coat, and shouted, "Gentlemen, I lost my home in the war. I lost my fortune in the war. I lost everything except my name. My name is not for sale, and if you fellows don't get out of here, I'll break this crutch over your heads!"

God's name cannot be bought and used. The one who uses it must be very careful that he or she does so with permission. To use someone's name is to claim to act in accordance with the person's wishes; more than that to act in a way that is consistent with the person. The Jewish authorities

were quick to claim the name of God but were they acting in a way that was consistent with God's nature? Peter was able to demonstrate that they were not, by speaking in the name, under the permissive authority, of Jesus Christ. It is Christ's desire to heal and to save, and Peter and John's actions to demonstrate it, which win the day. And this is where we find the surprise, for the power of Jesus is not demonstrated in what he did but in what was done to him. Peter, challenging the Jewish leadership, is emphatic in his claim that they crucified Jesus. He is equally emphatic in his



insistence that it was God who raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus' power was demonstrated in his passive acceptance of what was done to him. This then remains the great challenge to institutional leaders whether they be Jewish or Christian. The institution whether it is the Temple cult or the Christian Church has no right to exercise power over the people. They have no right to insist who is allowed to be healed by God. They have no right to insist that salvation is limited to those whom they approve. Ironically that stands in stark contrast to how verse 12 is frequently interpreted.

“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” How often have you heard this verse used as a stick to beat the followers of other world religions with? But that is an abuse of the text because it lifts it out of its context. It is the Jewish leaders and by implication the Christian leaders who are being challenged by the unique way of Christ, not the outsider. Peter’s challenge is not to exclude the outsider whom the gospel is for, but to challenge the religious authorities who have

a tendency to exclude on the grounds of protecting their tradition.

Being prophetic in leadership and preaching is challenging but it can also be transforming. Take the case of the once racially segregated churches in South Carolina, USA. One of the Baptist Churches there appointed a new preacher, who though very uneducated, understood the gospel. Most pastors would recoil at his preaching method. For his first sermon he simply flipped the bible open and started preaching the words his finger landed on, Paul's words to the Galatians that in Christ there is no

Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. In 1950's southern USA where churches were racially segregated the application was obvious, at least to the preacher. There shouldn't be black churches and white churches, there should just be churches made up of black and white.

The deacons weren't so appreciative of this message and demanded that their new preacher preach something different! The preacher did do something different – he fired the deacons and kept on preaching his message of racial unity. Many people left the church. His already small congregation

became even smaller, dwindling to just four people. But then it started to grow, bit by bit, until it included people of all races. One congregation member was a lecturer in English Literature at the university of Southern Carolina who would drive 70 miles to listen to this uneducated preacher. His reason? “Because that man preaches the gospel.”<sup>1</sup>

So, the church as the camera obscura, protecting Christians from the glare of God’s presence - I think not! The institution of the church is necessary; it was necessary for the

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<sup>1</sup> Reported in Tony Campolo, *You Can Make a Difference*

first Christians in Acts of the Apostles. They clearly had a working organisation with Bible study, fellowship, communal meals, prayer, financial accountability, evangelism, and positive relations with the larger society. They even had a still positive view of the Jewish institutions; they were pro-temple. Peter and John were on their way to the Temple to pray when the healing that sparked this controversy took place. But the institution must serve the power of Christ which is manifest through the work of his followers. If it tries to stifle, then it works against its master. So, the Easter season

brings our true inspiration into focus as we seek to be faithful to the Lord. It is easy to get distracted and lose direction. We must not allow that to happen. Amen.