

## At the Beautiful Gate

Acts 3:1-16

January 29, 2006

He was there that day, just as he was there every day, sitting at the edge of the gate, begging money from those who passed him by on their way into the Temple. It was not that he had given up hope. He never had any hope in the first place, any hope of a normal life, any hope of being anything different from what he was, anything different from what he had always been, a lame man, a beggar.

He was over forty years old, but he was still as he was as an infant, utterly dependent on the indulgence and pity of other people for survival. They carried him to the gate. They carried him back to the place he slept. They dropped a few coins into his hand so he could eat one more day. That was his life: sitting beside the gate, day after day after day sitting beside the Beautiful Gate, begging for money.

What irony! Here by the Beautiful Gate, a man whose life was anything but beautiful! A broken man, a humiliated man, an invisible man, no more than a part of the accustomed scenery, unnoticed alongside the gravel and dirt of the road until he cries out: *Give me! Give me something!*

*He had no dignity or beauty  
to make us take notice of him.  
There was nothing attractive about him,  
nothing that would draw us to him,  
We despised him and rejected him;  
he endured suffering and pain.  
No one would even look at him --  
we ignored him as if he were nothing.*

What irony for this man to live out his life in the shadow of the Beautiful Gate. Or maybe, there was no irony in this at all!

Every day they passed by him, Jews -- men and women and children -- going into the Temple, coming out of the Temple. They were coming to fulfill their religious duties, to pray and to offer sacrifice, so they might be persuaded to fulfill one other religious duty -- giving alms to the poor.

Certainly some did turn aside, putting something into his hand to salve their consciences and satisfy their religious obligations. Others, moved by genuine pity, may have done more, may have given a little bit extra, allowing themselves to feel something of his pain, something of his shame. But many surely walked on through the gate, not seeing, not hearing, unmoved, recognizing no obligation, acknowledging no responsibility.

It was not that they had given up hope. They simply had little use for it. They had enough to get by and maybe even enough to spare. They could walk and work and play and raise families. Their lives were what they were, and that was good enough. They came to the Temple, they fulfilled their religious duties, and, on occasion, they helped out a fellow human being. What more could one expect? They accepted their lot and they accepted his lot. *Que sera sera ... What will be will be.*

What irony! To pass through the Beautiful Gate into the Temple, into the presence of the living God, and to emerge unchanged, to walk back through the gate and back into life as it always had been. How can we come into the presence of the living God and leave no different for it?

That day, something did change. That day, something did happen. It was something God did. It was something God did through the faith two men put in the power of the name of Jesus.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and Peter and John approached the Beautiful Gate on their way into the Temple to pray. He called out to them: *Give me! Give me something!*

They looked at him, and Peter answered, *No ... I have no money.*

Peter and John were Jews, Jews coming to the Temple to pray, to fulfill their religious duties. They were coming to pray to their God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, their God and the God of their friend and teacher, Jesus. And they were believers. They believed in the power and goodness of God, the power and goodness of God they had witnessed for themselves in what Jesus said and did, the power and goodness of God they had witnessed for themselves when they saw and ate and talked with the risen Jesus, the power and goodness of God they had witnessed for themselves when God's own Spirit came upon them and filled them with courage and power and purpose. They knew for themselves what it meant to be transformed, to have fear turned to joy, to have despair turned to hope, to have resignation turned to faith, to have conceit turned to love.

And so when they looked at him, they saw him. There in the shadow of the Beautiful Gate, they saw him as he was -- a beautiful man, a child of God, a creature made in God's image, a creature bearing God's own likeness. And there on the doorstep of the Temple, they saw him as he could be, as he could be transformed like them through the power of the resurrected Jesus.

Peter said to him: *I have no money, but I give you what I have: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth I order you to get up and walk!*

And he did. He got up and walked and jumped and went into the Temple with John and Peter, praising God.

That's what happened at the Beautiful Gate that day. What will happen here, today? What will God do among us? What do we believe God can do among us? Will we come here into the presence of the living God and leave unchanged? Resigned to life as it already is, as it always will be? Or will we see, through the eyes of faith in Jesus, life as it can be, as it should be, as it will be?

Resignation is the opposite of faith. Resignation betrays a belief that God is powerless, that one's own fate and the fate of the world are already sealed. Resignation denies the resurrection of Jesus, because it is absurd to believe that a God who raised Jesus from death would at the same time be powerless or unwilling to lift a finger to help any one of his other children.

This is our faith: that the same power by which God raised Jesus from death is now at work in us and among us. What do we believe God can do among us?

But a wise young man once told me: *Even if I could be healed, I wouldn't want it.* He loves himself, as he is. The way he sees it, to want to be different would imply he was unhappy with who he is already. He has discovered the secret to contentment: it's not about what you have or don't have, but about who you are, about knowing you are loved and learning to love yourself as you are.

He's right, but resignation is not contentment. Resignation means the absence of faith, while contentment comes from faith. Resignation grudgingly accepts its lot in life, while contentment joyfully welcomes life however it comes. Resignation denies God's power and love, while contentment explicitly trusts God's power and love.

Faith, in my view, is a dynamic blend of contentment and restlessness. Because of faith in Jesus, we can say without reservation: *This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!* And because of faith in Jesus, we can say without resignation: *What we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us!* With faith in Jesus, we are content with what is, and restless for what is to come! We have nothing to fear, nothing to lose, everything to gain, everything to hope for!

Maybe some of you have given up hope. Maybe some of you never had any hope in the first place. Maybe some of you have little use for it. Or maybe some of you have some hope but it's a hope for something invisible, something intangible, something outside this realm, something outside this life, hope for an other time and an other place.

May God's Spirit stir us to restlessness! May God's Spirit bring the pale embers of hope smoldering in our hearts to a restless flame! May God's Spirit awaken us to the palpable presence of God here and now, healing bodies, healing souls, reconciling enemies, proclaiming justice, making peace.

This is our faith: that the same power by which God raised Jesus from death is now at work in us and among us. At every moment of our lives, in every now, there is hope. At every moment, in every now, God can bring life out of death, wholeness out of brokenness, peace out of strife, beauty out of chaos.

Even when that moment comes, when you or I or one we love draws near to death, hope is no less, because death is no obstacle to God's power and love. Death is no dead-end, no cul-de-sac, no wall, but a door, a gate, a Beautiful Gate, conveying us into the presence of the living God!