

Bible Study Notes: 2nd Week of Pascha, Wednesday 5/11/2016

Acts 4:13-22

13 Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus. 14 And beholding the man which was healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. 15 But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, 16 Saying, What shall we do to these men? For that indeed a notable miracle hath been done by them is manifest to all them that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny it. 17 But that it spread no further among the people, let us straitly threaten them, that they speak henceforth to no man in this name. 18 And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. 20 For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. 21 So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding nothing how they might punish them, because of the people: for all men glorified God for that which was done. 22 For the man was above forty years old, on whom this miracle of healing was shewed.

It's very appropriate that the Holy Fathers have given us to read from the Book of Acts during this post-Paschal period. Having sacrificed Himself for us on the Cross, destroyed the gates of Hell, offering salvation to all mankind and having risen from the dead, thereby manifesting His Divinity before all the world; now the Apostles begin to go forth, preach and work miracles as Christ commanded them. Strictly speaking, the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost had already happened from a chronological point of view, but the Holy Fathers have placed these readings from the Book of Acts at this time for our spiritual benefit nonetheless.

Although today's reading is from Acts 4:13-22, we need to go back to the readings from Bright Friday and going forward to better understand today's passage. Peter and John went up to the temple to pray and a man who was lame from birth sat at the 'Beautiful Gate' begging alms, since he was unable to work due to his infirmity. When he asked Peter and John for alms, Peter said '*Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give to you. In the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.*' The man was completely healed immediately and proceeded to follow them into the Temple walking, leaping and praising God. Peter then taught the people in the Temple and preached to them about Christ. For this, they were arrested and put in jail. The next day, they were brought before the rulers, elders, scribes and Annas the high priest, Caiaphas and his family to be questioned. When asked by what power or name they had healed the lame

man, Peter (filled with the Holy Spirit) proclaimed that the man was healed in the Name of Christ, and this is where today's reading goes on with more of the story.

The *Orthodox Study Bible* has a footnote about the comment that Peter and John were 'uneducated and untrained men' saying that *"this is in reference specifically to their religious education. This lack of religious training stands in contrast to the expertise of the Sanhedrin. The wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit transcend earthly and religious training, for God works in the humble and simple as well as in those who are formally educated or influential."*

We can still see this idea today, that when it comes to religious and spiritual education, people sometimes want to make sure that the person they're talking with has what they consider the necessary academic credentials, whether they are clergy or laity. It goes without saying that the person does need to have the necessary academic education to work in many technical and professional fields. Yet, even though it might seem logical to apply that same rationale to spiritual and religious matters, we must acknowledge that a person does not necessarily receive true spiritual and religious training in an academically accredited university. As one Orthodox leader put it, "A Priest is ordained, not by virtue of earning an academic degree, but rather by the Grace of the Holy Spirit which is conferred upon him through the Bishop at his ordination."

In order for any school or seminary to be accredited, the state has various secular standards which must be met. Yet, there are many excellent seminaries who train clergy, but are not accredited by the State. If the State mandates that they must learn French or German, or requires that they study mathematics and science and so forth, though these are worthy fields of study, they are not necessary skills for the clergy or for lay religious instructors. Just as the State has no business trying to run the Church, they also have no business trying to run seminaries who train clergy to serve in the Church. There are also government officials who oversee this academic accreditation process who themselves might be atheists, or from other religious or heterodox backgrounds who know little or nothing about Orthodox Christianity. One must ask, how would they be qualified to establish educational requirements for Orthodox clergy and laity?

There was an Orthodox Priest who having completed seminary, was ordained by his Bishop and assigned to serve at a parish. In this parish there were many well-educated parishioners who looked down at their Priest, simply because he did not hold a Ph.D. in theology. After enduring a lot of harsh and ongoing criticism, the unfortunate Priest decided to stop serving at that parish, enroll in an academically-accredited university and earn a Ph.D. Had St. Peter and St. John and the other Apostles listened to those

worldly-minded Jewish leaders, they might have abandoned their work as Christ's Apostles and studied at a Jewish university to earn some kind of worldly credentials and thus receive proper 'respect' from the Jews. Thank God they did not pay attention to that criticism!

For the record, there are certainly those who feel a calling to study theology more deeply and achieve advanced degrees in order to teach, write and so forth and many who do have made important contributions to our Orthodox Faith!

St. John Chrysostom in writing about Acts 4, contrasts the Apostles with the Jewish officials who are questioning them about this miracle. As it says in verse 14, *'seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it.'* In other words, if there had been some way of denying this miracle, they would have denied it, but they acted out the fear of men, since all the people witnessed this great miracle. Then when they tried to silence the Apostles and forbid them to speak about Jesus Christ, St. John Chrysostom says: Threaten? And expect them to stop preaching? They crucified Christ and yet they expect to turn the Apostles back? Having been imprisoned, they still did not prevail in forcing them to speak submissively. Then Peter and John answered them *"Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard."*

Here is an important principle for us to take to heart: *"While God commands our obedience to governing authorities, obedience to God comes first. When the two are in conflict, the believer must follow God and be willing to accept the consequences."* (from the Orthodox Study Bible)

We could read these verses and think, 'Certainly the Apostles Peter and John were so filled with the Holy Spirit that they could heal a 40-year-old man who was born lame and could not walk. After all, they were great saints and apostles. I on the other hand, have not been given the gift of working miracles, so while this is great to read about, it essentially has little or nothing to do with my life.' On one level, that would seem like a reasonable and logical way to think. Yet, we're not dealing with reasonable, logical things here. Our challenge is rather to try and see this from a spiritual point of view.

The Holy Fathers often see in these kinds of miraculous events, a spiritual principle that **IS** applicable to our lives. For example, in Matthew 15:30 it says *"And great multitudes came unto Him, having with them those that were lame..."* St. Theophylact says *"Behold their faith, how they even ascend a mountain although they are lame and blind...And though ye are lame, seeing the good but unable to go towards it..."* So we can also understand a kind of spiritual lameness, in other words some disposition or spiritual condition that prevents

us from doing good. Often, this is because of our sins, or it also could be that we have to struggle with some challenge in our lives first, in order to help us acquire the virtues with God's help.

Christ established the Church, His Mystical Body on earth, through the Grace of the Holy Spirit which was given to the Holy Apostles and handed down to us. Through the Church, we can come and receive healing for both our spiritual and physical infirmities. We have the Life-Giving Sacrament of Holy Communion, the Sacrament of Unction for our spiritual and physical ailments, the Sacrament of Confession for the forgiveness of our sins and all the rest. In other words, we may not have been given the specific spiritual gift of being able to heal someone of a physical infirmity as the man's congenital lameness, but we most certainly can pray for one another and help one another to overcome our spiritual lameness which prevents us from doing good both spiritually and materially!

In order for us to receive healing and to acquire the Grace with which to help others, we must first make every effort to practice our faith. As St. Nikolai Velimirovic once said, There are 3 ways that men can feel themselves in the Lord's Presence...

- 1. It is for us to exert ourselves and strive to come into the Lord's presence, and for God to allow us into His presence and illumine us by it...which is to say that we must, with faith and longing, do all we can to come into God's presence;*
- 2. then we must follow the call and directions of the holy, apostolic Church and the Church's Fathers and Teachers;*
- 3. and lastly, only after fulfilling the first two conditions, we must, with prayer and hope, wait upon God to bring us to Himself and by His presence, to illumine, strengthen, heal and save us.*

This requires at least a little bit of faith and hope in the Lord, and it requires a lot of patience. Just as the Lenten Season was all about the theme of repentance, so the Paschal season is all about the theme of faith. Let us contemplate these things and turn to the Risen Lord to heal us of all our infirmities, that we can receive God's Grace to be of help to others. Christ is Risen!