

Acts 4:1-22

V13

"The members of the council were **amazed** when they saw the **boldness** of Peter and John, for **they could see** that they were **ordinary men** with no special training in Scriptures. They also recognised them as **men who had been with Jesus.**"

If you visit some cathedrals and church buildings you might see stained glass windows with pictures depicting the apostles, or great men of faith, they are portrayed as saints with shining halos around their heads. These images suggest to us, 'we're not like them'. They were holy, they were special, handpicked by Jesus. 'When they prayed amazing things happened, but God isn't so bothered about my prayers.' 'They could do no wrong, but I'm not like that.'

As soon as you pick up the bible and read scriptures for yourself, you get a whole different picture, don't you?

The great hero's of the faith suddenly appear quite human and normal after all. I am struck just how ordinary and normal they appear. The scriptures are very intentional about showing us the real people God uses, with their weaknesses failings and all.

The great Elijah after facing off the prophets of Baal runs in fear from Jezebel. Go figure! King David a 'man after God's own heart' was also capable of committing adultery and murder, who out of rage was also ready to massacre an entire family along with the workers, because one greedy man would not give him and his men some food. He had a fiery temper, yet he demonstrated great faith, wrote the most incredible psalms, was generous and a great lover of God. The bible never tries to hide people's faults.

The twelve disciples were ordinary men with personality types we can all relate to in some measure. They were people just like us and others we know. We can cringe, knowingly at their faults and failings and identify with those lightbulb moments and their questioning of Jesus. They were not the great philosophers and theologians of their day. They weren't trained speakers, teachers or people of great influence in their community. As far as the religious establishment was concerned, they were outsiders and no-marks. They were men prone to 'foot in mouth syndrome', bad attitudes, spiritual ambition, pride, greed, lapses of faith, dismissive of children, judgemental and who knew bitter failure. Just the sort of people you want, to show others what God is like! Jesus even commented they were a bit 'slow' spirituality speaking. (Luke 24:25).

I believe that God disqualifies us all from effective service on the basis of '**our ability**' in order to qualify us all on the basis of '**His ability**'.

You can come with all your talents, all your natural gifts, your experience, your personality, your intellect, your upbringing or whatever else. You can present your CV to God and say "I can be of great use to you!"

What's God's reply? "Yes you can, but not until you realise you have nothing that I need." Only when you understand that you must lay it all down, can God bring His special anointing on your life.

Oswald Chambers said that **"the work of God is to make us like little children."**

What did he mean? Quite simply that God is making us less reliant on ourselves and more reliant on Him. Less faith in our ability and more faith in His. Less dependant on our resources and more on His.

When people meet for the first time, one of the first questions often asked is, "what do you do for a living?" There's nothing wrong with the question, its a good way of getting to know people and establish what you may have in common and to understand the kinds of pressures they may face from day to day. **It is not a question, however, that helps to understand someone's usefulness to God!**

Your profession does not make you more or less useful, what matters in God's economy is your devotion to Him, whether you have a heart that's towards God. By devotion, I don't just mean someone who sings, listens to music and reads their bible. As good as these things are, what I mean is **someone who orients their life towards God, wanting to live in a manner that pleases Him.** A prayerful person who deliberately makes choices that honour God, even when everything in them wants to gratify their flesh.

It was not Cornelius' status or profession as an "officer or "centurion" in the Roman army that attracted God's attention, but what does the scripture say?

An angel came to him saying;

"Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God."

God saw an open heart, a generous spirit, a consistent godly life oriented toward Him. **Cornelius was effectively saying to God; "Open for business!"**

He was doing God's 'general' will. He was not even a Christian but God saw an open channel, through which He could bless all non-Jews. We are often concerned about God's 'particular' will for our lives when we should first be honouring Him in our daily lives.

Is our usefulness to God limited to what happens in and around church meetings? No, of course not. We spend far more time in our workplace and this is as important to God as any other part of our life. We should be the best employees. The most generous, loyal, hard working, reliable and productive people in our workplaces. We should be examples of godly living, clean speaking and respectful of all, willing to share the reason for our hope in Christ. Be the message, let people see Christ in you.

The disciples came from very different backgrounds and perhaps would not have been our obvious choice to spread the gospel to all nations. One of the disciples was a former zealot - a political radical, part of a sect that was determined to overthrow Rome. It used terror, sabotage and whatever means it could to try and undermine Roman rule. Another was a tax collector - virtually a traitor to the Jewish nation for colluding with Rome. At least four were fishermen and a number of them were close friends who would have known each other from childhood. We don't know all their professions but others were probably tradesmen of some kind. With all their faults and character flaws, this was the clay Jesus would mould into vessels fit for His service. Surely this gives us all hope! God excludes no-one from his service who comes to Him with their hearts opened wide.

Ordinary people in Christ's hands are a mighty world changing force.

Paul was no different. He recognised his need of Christ and he too disqualified himself on the grounds of his own ability, often speaking of his total reliance upon Christ.

He disciplined his flesh so as not to be disqualified after he had preached (1 Cor 9:27), he also said; we preach Christ crucified and ourselves as your servants (2 Cor 4:5); what a wretched man I am....(Rom 7:24) and I will boast only of my weakness so that the power of Christ can work through me. (2 Cor 12:5,9) etc

Paul was an exceptional man of great intellect but he recognised that this, of itself, meant nothing. There are many highly intelligent, gifted people who have never offered themselves as living sacrifices and have remained unfruitful and unproductive in the service of God.

Think about Jesus' choice of His disciples for a moment. From a human perspective, the gospel message and the founding of the church hung on a few ordinary people who came with all their faults and frailties. Their training and preparation is more accurately measured in months rather than years. A brief intense schedule of discipleship over about 18 months and when it was over, Jesus was betrayed and they abandoned Him. (Matt26:56)
Jesus training programme looked to be an abject failure and they went back to their old trades.

This account of the two disciples standing before the Council only makes sense in the light of the reality that broke into their lives.

I love **the scene that Luke paints after Jesus ascension into heaven.** The remaining 11 disciples were all together continuing in prayer with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and with Jesus brothers.
Acts 1:12-14

Looking at this from the outside it is little more than a family and friends gathering. The 'friends and family of Jesus society' now just a handful of diehards who once knew a man called Jesus.

The ordinariness of the picture is clear. They were in a house in Jerusalem and met together to pray in an upstairs room. Not exactly a meeting of top executives to develop a marketing strategy, to take the gospel to all nations!

When they got everyone together there were about 120 people.

Yet in truth, all was not as it seemed to the casual onlooker. Everything had changed!

The playwright David Lodge recounted a story about the performance of one of his plays:

The day is 22nd November 1963. He is in a playhouse watching one of his creations being performed on stage. There is a scene whereby the plot requires a transistor radio to be tuned into a local radio station. On this day the theatre is full. The actors are caught up in the drama of their performance - the scripted lines, the choreographed movements, the contrived emotions. The audience is spellbound, pulled into a world, wonderfully conjured up before them, when along comes this scene. The character takes the radio and flicks it on; there is a crackle and hiss of static. He dials the tuner, a jumble of noise, voices surge and fade, music blares and stutters and then, stark and urgent, a voice breaks through, 'Today in Dallas, Texas President John F Kennedy was shot and killed.' The actor quickly switches off the radio but it is too late. The reality of the real world has, with a few plain words, burst in upon a self-created world of the play being staged, and in that moment the play is over. Truth has broken in.

When Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples, reality broke in. They saw the living, resurrected Christ. He had opened their understanding and before their very eyes ascended into heaven. Not long after this, all heaven broke loose! They were soon to be filled with the promised Holy Spirit and the unreal drama of a self serving life on earth, that had been sold by the devil, was over!. **Now they understood with breathtaking reality, their eternal hope and the true purpose of life. In a moment of time everything had changed.**

This reality should be the same for all of us!

2 Cor 3:16

"Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away."

So Jesus took a few men, who's trades and occupations were nothing of great note. Gave them a few months training for an impossible task, he had no plan 'B' should the twelve fail. Now throw into the mix a disciple to betray him and subsequently hang himself! Jesus however knew exactly what He was doing.

The success of His mission depended entirely on the sovereign plan of God, a work for which God alone would gain all the glory.

We are to be instruments in His hands in order that He is given all the glory.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 NLT

"Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in this world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead God chose the things the world considers foolish....."

Zechariah 4:6

"Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit says the Lord."

Ordinary people under the power of the Holy Spirit are a more potent force for good on the earth than any human strategy.

James 5:17

"Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years! Then when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops."

The verses preceding this are an encouragement to pray in all circumstances. Drawing down the power of God into our broken world of suffering, hardship and sickness and in praise for those who are happy.

The bible heroes were all like the rest of us. Human in every way. Selected from the unworthy and unqualified, people with a nature the same as ours. They didn't rise to the highest usefulness because they were different or superhuman.

Don't be discouraged when you fail. God takes us as we are in our brokenness and with our limitations. He will take whatever we lay before Him and exchange our rags for His riches in Christ Jesus.

He chooses us in our humility and complete submission.

God does of course call people who we would say are 'brilliant and exceptional.' William Tyndale who first translated the Bible into common language was able to speak and write 8 languages fluently.

Great talent and gifting does not exclude you; far from it, but it does place a greater responsibility on you to bring your gifts into submission to God, for his glory, rather than using them solely for personal gain.

In truth when we look at any person, they are extraordinary!
Created in the image of God. Say to the person next to you; "you are extraordinary!"

2 Corinthians 12:8

The apostle Paul was a brilliant man but Jesus spoke to him saying **"My power is made perfect in weakness"**

The prophet Amos was the poorest type of farmer - A herdsman who also tended sycamore fig trees. God sent this man, from the bottom rung of society - "Your'e the man, go and tell the northerners what's going to come upon them."

His praying affected God - "Lord I beg you, don't do that."
His preaching angered men.

Jonah - fled from God - when he eventually got to Nineveh he didn't exactly preach his heart out! God used the weak stuff in this man.

We have already heard about **King David, Elijah and what about Gideon, Sampson, Abraham, Rahab etc all weak vessels, but God!**

Fanny Crosby, America's most prolific hymn writer was the most unlikely vessel God would use. Blinded because of a doctors mistake but she saw her blindness as a great blessing from God, saying "the first face I will ever see, will be the face of Christ!"

In many ways it was her grandmother who was the unseen hero. When she heard Fanny was incurably blind, she decided to be her eyes. She took the girl on long walks and graphically described all she saw; sunsets, clouds, flowers, birds and the beauty of nature. Her word pictures were vividly captured by Fanny's imagination. They also learned the sweet communion of prayer as they kneeled together and her grandmother patiently taught the bible to her which she managed to commit much of to memory.

In her darkness God gave great light to many that radiated in song and poetry across the world.

To God be the glory & Blessed assurance are just two of her many well known hymns.

Smith Wigglesworth was born in Menston, Yorkshire to an impoverished family. He would work in the fields with his mother picking turnips as a young child. He became a Christian aged 8 and became a plumber by trade. His wife taught him to read the bible which was the only book he ever read. He was powerfully used by God when he received the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Gladys Aylward who hearing about China at school decided to be a missionary to China. A remarkable woman, powerfully used by God, who payed an enormous price, was rejected by missionary organisations because of her poor education.

Ordinary people with an extraordinary God.

Acts 3

Why are you looking at us as though our own power or godliness has wrought this miracle?

We must know at the very core of our being that all power and godliness is of Him, it is all about Him and nothing of ourselves. God desires and deserves all the glory!

The apostles certainly struggled with pride, just like every fallen human being, but the driving passion in their lives was to be like Him and to make Him known to others. They took every opportunity to point people to Christ. ***'He is the reason this man was healed, so that you may know Christ, the one who you crucified is risen from the dead!'***

Acts 4:8-10

How was he healed? In the powerful name of Jesus!

Why was he healed? So you may know Christ is risen from the dead and is the hope of the world!

Now the council noticed that these men had been with Jesus.

Jesus was the disciples pattern and He didn't have a long time with them. The gospels show us clearly where Jesus drew His wisdom and strength from.

He would go to lonely places to pray. It says he often withdrew into the wilderness to pray and would spend whole nights in prayer. (Luke 6:12, Luke 5:16). Time and again we are brought back to observe Jesus relying on His Father.

Observing Jesus' life they said; "Lord, teach us to pray." This should also be our prayer.

In Jesus last hours with His disciples, what did he say? "Watch and pray." He was not saying aimless prayers or repetitions, he was in deep communion with his Father and drew strength, wisdom and knowledge from God.

When Christ opened His disciples minds to understand, what is the first thing we find them doing? Praying together!

The disciples were ordinary men who had been with Jesus. They were men of prayer.

Like their teacher.

I heard a true story about a certain bible college where there was a particularly influential and highly respected teacher. The students would be sent out periodically to preach at various venues and reports were inevitably very positive. Those observing and reporting back to the college, however, noticed that a number of the young preachers had a strange mannerism. They would frequently flick their hair just above their forehead. The observers were curious to know where they had learned this strange mannerism. It turned out that

this very influential teacher had an unfortunate comb-over which would periodically fall in front of his face as he spoke. He was continually having to flick it back into place. Without realising, his students were emulating the teacher.

A soul that is habitually in Jesus' presence will pick up something of His very nature.

This includes the boldness they observed in the disciples. This word boldness means 'to leave nothing unsaid'. The disciples didn't hold back but spoke freely of everything they had witnessed. They were not calculating what they could or couldn't disclose, but they were uncompromising and unafraid. If they were afraid, it certainly didn't hold them back.

The writer explains it more fully saying:
"Now Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit said....."

What does this say to me and you?
Their communion with Christ was no different from that which each of us can experience. Being with Christ is possible for everyone and being filled with the Spirit is His promise for all who ask.

The healing of this crippled man was one of many miracles the apostles performed.

Acts 2:43

We are invited into the story because it teaches us so much.

Acts 3:1 It began with "A certain lame man..."

We don't know his name, we know he was crippled from birth and he was now 40 years of age.

He was noticed by the disciples, who could have so easily just passed him by on the way to the prayer meeting. They noticed him, not just someone with problems or a problem person, but a bearer of God's image who was in need.

He had probably lost all sense of dignity and could no longer look people in the eye. Perhaps the years of sympathetic looks or the hard faced passers by who found him an inconvenience. Others dropped money for him, but they too were faceless people to him by now.

But Peter did something different. "Look at us" he said.

The man gave them his attention, but even now there is a sense this is an empty gaze rather than real engagement. They were soon to get his attention however!

Peter told him; "I don't have money" I haven't got silver or gold, but I'm going to give you what I have got. I am going to give you the most precious possession I hold. "What I have"

In this short sentence, Peter summed up the entirety of his possessions! Something of greater worth than all the riches in the world, the treasure of great price that is worth abandoning everything else for.

"In **the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth**, walk!"

He is totally careless who might hear the name of Jesus.

We serve a living saviour! Alive, risen, ascended and ruling in the heavens with all power and all authority in His name.

If you doubt that God can use you in ordinary daily life, watch this:

video - Strangers