

would like to start by reminding you all of what is probably the greatest comedy routine ever created. I am speaking, of course, of the one that goes kind of like this.

Costello: Look Abbott, if you're the coach, you must know all the players.

Abbott: I certainly do.

Costello: Well you know I've never met the guys. So you'll have to tell me their names, and then I'll know who's playing on the team.

Abbott: Oh, I'll tell you their names, but you know it seems to me they give these ball players now-a-days very peculiar names.

Costello: Funny names?

Abbott: Strange names, pet names... Well, let's see, we have on the St Louis team, Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third...

Costello: That's what I want to find out.

Abbott: I say Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know's on third.

Costello: Are you the manager?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: You gonna be the coach too?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: And you don't know the fellows' names?

Abbott: Well I should.

Costello: Well then who's on first?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: I mean the fellow's name.

Abbott: Who.

Costello: The guy on first.

Abbott: Who.

Costello: The first baseman.

Abbott: Who.

Costello: The guy playing...

Abbott: Who is on first!

Costello: I'm asking you who's on first.

Abbott: That's the man's name.

Costello: That's who's name?

Abbott: Yes.

Explaining Comedy

Now, I know that comedy shouldn't need to be explained in order to be funny, but I would just like for us to reflect for a moment on why that particular routine works. Abbott and Costello are both using the very same words, but they mean something entirely different by what they say. That is the premise of the bit. But the reason why the humour works so well is because, through the genius of their writing and delivery, we, the listeners, are made to feel as if we are smarter than both of them.

We understand that every time Abbott uses the word "who," he's referring to a player's nickname. But every time the Costello uses the word who, he's using it as an interrogative pronoun. We are smart enough not only to understand that, but also to understand that the people on both sides of this conversation do not understand each other at all.

There is an inherent humour in that kind of situation where two parties are failing to understand each other despite using the same words. And it's always funnier when we feel superior because we are in on the joke. And I actually think that this is the kind of humour that the Book of Acts has set up for us in our reading this morning.

Peter, John and the Council

In our reading, the Apostles Peter and John have been dragged in front of the council in Jerusalem who want to know something very specific about something they have done to disturb the peace. We didn't read the whole story,

so you need to understand that it all started when these two men were at the temple and were accosted by a lame man begging at the gate. Peter didn't have any money to give him and so decided instead to heal him in the name of Jesus.

When a man that everyone knew had been lame from birth suddenly started walking and leaping and praising God, well, you can imagine that people noticed. A crowd quickly gathered. And Peter began to speak to them, preaching about Jesus, his death and resurrection. At this point the council had the two men arrested and brought in for questioning.

Now the reason why they arrested them was specifically because they were causing a disturbance by preaching to the people. They were riling up the crowd and the council was particularly upset because Peter had been accusing the Jewish leadership of aiding and abetting in the execution of Jesus. But Peter and John, apparently, thought that they had been arrested for something else.

The Misunderstanding

And that is where the Abbott and Costello routine begins. The council asks the apostles, "**By what power or by what name did you do this?**" And since they brought these people in for disturbing the peace and stirring up the crowd, what they mean by "this" is obvious to them. They are asking who said that they could cause this trouble.

But what we don't realize is that there are a whole bunch of social assumptions behind that question that are not apparent to us. That question meant something very specific in that kind of situation. But in order to understand that we need to understand something essential about ancient Mediterranean Society.

Patronage

The most important social power in that society did not rest with kings or priests but actually with a group of people who were known as patrons. Patrons were wealthy and influential people. They were also usually men. And the more powerful a patron was, the more clients he had.

The patron-client relationship was very much a two-way relationship. The patron did things for his clients. He would get them jobs and favours and defend them in court. If the need arose, he would send his thugs to beat up someone who insulted his client.

But the clients also owed a great deal to their patrons. They would vote the way their patron told them. They would turn out and cheer anytime their patron did something in public. Whatever their patron asked of them, they would do. And, of course, if they ever disappointed their patron in any way, the punishment would be swift.

Behind Everything

Behind the scenes, almost everything in the entire Roman Empire was run by the patronage system. The most powerful patrons could count whole cities, towns and villages among their clientele. Indeed, the only thing that



made the emperor so powerful was the fact that he had more clients than anybody else, including, of course, many powerful patrons in their own right.

Even more important, though, no one could escape this power structure. Everyone had to be a client of somebody. Even slaves, the moment that they were given their freedom, automatically became the clients of their former masters.

So, when the council asks Peter and John by what power or name they were acting when they caused the disturbance, they are asking who their patron is. They are essentially asking what powerful and wealthy person they need to complain to who will discipline these two unruly men for what they have done. They think that they are telling Peter and John that they are in deep trouble.

Peter and John's Understanding

But Peter and John do not get any of that that because they completely misunderstand the question in an Abbott and Costello way. When the council asks, **“By what power or by what name did you do this?”** they think they are asking about something else entirely. **“Rulers of the people and elders,”** they reply, **“if we are being questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are being asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.”**

Did you catch that? As far as the apostles are concerned, they have been arrested, not for causing a disturbance and trash talking the council, but for doing a “good deed” by healing a lame man. And, instead of being interrogated about who their patron is who can rein in their rowdiness, they assume that the council wants to know what name has the power to bring about such a powerful healing. They may be using the same words, but they are talking about something completely different.

Why the Writer is Doing This

And if this episode were written by a mid-twentieth century comedy team, that misunderstanding would be stretched out for a while and hilarity would ensue. But the author of the Book of Acts is interested in more than just making us laugh. He does, however, want to make use of one element of the comedic scenario. He wants us, the readers, to be in on the joke. He wants us to realize that, in this situation, we are smarter than both sides of this conversation because we actually understand what each is talking about.

You see, this story is not just about the power of the name of Jesus to bring about healing in somebody's life. It is about that, of course. But the author is using this story to expand our understanding of the power of that name. In fact, I believe that he has set up this whole comedy routine to get us to think about the power of the name of Jesus in a new way.

Showing Us Deeper Meaning

You see, the members of the council have asked a question according to their understanding of how power and authority works in their world. They've asked for the name of Peter and John's patron. Peter and John have answered according to their experience of the power of the name of Jesus to bring healing.

But the very juxtaposition of those two quite different understandings of the meaning of a name, is designed to make us ask a question. And that question is, what does the powerful divine name of Jesus do when it is put up against the powerful secular names of our world. It turns out, you see, that the name of Jesus might just be powerful in ways that even the disciples have not yet suspected.

Power in Jesus' Name

I am not sure to what extent Peter and John have understood the power of Jesus' name at this point. They know it is powerful to heal, that it connects with people where they are struggling and in need of help. But they just seem to be coming to understand something more about its power. It is not that Jesus is their patron (at least not in the way that the council would have understood that), it is that the name of Jesus calls into question the very system of patronage and its lines of power and authority. And so, Peter boldly proclaims that **“there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”**

Now my purpose in talking about all of this is not to explain an ancient joke. Nor is it to give you a lesson about how power and authority worked in the ancient Roman Empire. That is, quite literally, ancient history that has little effect on life today. What I would like you to learn is not to do what the members of the council and, to a certain extent, Peter and John did. Do not underestimate the power of the name of Jesus.

More Power than you Thought

It is a name that is powerful to bring healing. Because Jesus entered into our suffering and weakness – especially doing so upon the cross – he certainly can meet us in our suffering and our struggles. And when we go out in that name to share love and compassion, we will learn firsthand the power that is in the name. That is what Peter and John had discovered in the temple.

But when they were brought before the council, they discovered the power of Jesus' name to call into question the lines of power and authority in their society. They discovered that the name was stronger than the most powerful patrons. And I believe that that we are greatly in need of discovering that power as well.

Our Power Systems

Though we live in a democratic country where, at least in theory, everything is not supposed to be controlled by a small group of wealthy and elite influences, we often discover that it doesn't work out that way.

Wealthy companies and corporations certainly seem to have a lot of control over what we have to pay to get the basics of life. Influential developers seem to exercise a lot of power over what kinds of housing can be built and how much it costs in the midst of a housing crisis. Powerful influences seem to be at work to make sure that wages do not keep pace with inflation.

Now, none of these nebulous entities have official power. We did not vote to give them this influence. They tend to work in back rooms and behind the scenes much like the patronage system did in the ancient world. But their impact on our lives – often greater than that of elected officials – is undeniable.

Challenging Names

And I don't know about you, but I am often dismayed by how this prevents us from building the kind of country and society that we actually desire and need. And I think that kind of dismay has become so common, that it has made us apathetic and prone to give in to despair about the possibility of anything ever changing.

If only there were a name that was powerful enough to call into question the hidden powers and authorities of our present world. Wouldn't that be something if we could tap into that kind of power? Well, apparently that was what Peter and John realized they had tapped into on that day before the council.

That name still exists, and it is still that powerful. The question is, what wouldn't we be able to do if we were able to truly believe that?