

## Freeing the Word of Life (Acts 5:17-42)

*We live in a world of competing ideas. If we are to fulfil Jesus's call to make new disciples then we need to be confident in the gospel and courageous in sharing our faith. How can we manage that? The story of the early church in Acts is a great place to look.*

### **An Increasingly Contested Culture**

Have you noticed how things have been changing in our culture over recent decades.

It used to be that the dominant attitude what was what was called a pluralist or multi-cultural outlook. All beliefs are equally valid. You can believe what you like, just don't try to make me change my belief. The aim was to create a society where everyone got on and lots of different ideas could be held together without any serious conflict.

That kind of outlook is still around, but it is being replaced by an increasingly contested culture. That is we live in a society with a number of different views where people increasingly view different ideas as dangerous or damaging and need to be shut down. We see that with 'cancel culture,' where speakers are barred from being able to speak at universities, because their views are considered dangerous. It also shows itself in the term, 'culture wars', which describes the increasingly contentious debates between different viewpoints - mainly in the USA, but increasingly here as well.

And this more contested culture shows itself in all kinds of different ways. The strength of feeling and conflict over Brexit, the debate online about whether vaccines for Covid should be taken, the barring of people like J.K. Rowling for daring to question the idea that trans women are truly women and so on.

People with different views are no longer considered wrong, they are considered dangerous and need to be silenced. This viewpoint is also carried over into attitudes to religion. So, for example in 2007, Christopher Hitchens wrote a book: *God is not Great! How religion poisons everything*. 2007 book. He and many others consider people of faith not just wrong, but dangerous and in need of silencing.

And in many ways the Christian message is being subtly silenced. For example how often have you heard the good news about Jesus articulated on mainstream media recently? Decades ago, there would have been films or programmes about Jesus over the Easter weekend on TV. I did check out the TV schedules for the main 5 channels. On Good Friday, the only Christian item was 'Easter at Kings' on BBC", which I guess was some choral music for people to enjoy - but hardly mainstream. Also, Channel 4 did show a recent film, *Risen* about the resurrection - they put it on at 1:30am on Saturday morning - hardly prime time! BBC1 Prime Time on Easter Sunday showed the Lion King, followed by Doctor Who, whilst ITV had Britain's Got Talent.

So, how can the Christian message be set free in a culture where so many different ideas are increasingly seeking to be dominant and silence other dissenting views and the Christian message itself seems to be cut out of the mainstream media.

The answer comes down to us. We need to have confidence and courage.

In our passage from Acts this morning, the Jewish authorities are seeking to silence the early Christians, to cancel them from speaking about Jesus. They are in power and they use drastic measures: they arrest them and put them in jail. But God has other ideas. He sends an angel releases them from jail and sets them free to carry on speaking the word!

That's an amazing miracle, that sets the good news free, but what is perhaps even more remarkable is that the apostles have so much confidence and courage to carry on speaking about Jesus, when there is such strong opposition.

So as we come to this passage let's ask the question:

Why can we be confident about the good news?

How can we find courage to share the good news about Jesus?

### **Why can we be confident in the Good News about Jesus?**

Firstly, why can we be confident in the good news. In a sense this is two questions. We need to be confident that the good news about Jesus is good news, that it actually offers people something valuable and worthwhile, that it is a message that matters. But also you need to believe that it is true.

In our passage, the angel's speech shows us why the gospel matters, whilst Gamaliel's speech gives us pointers to why we can be confident it is true.

#### **So why can we be confident in its value? - Angel's Speech**

As the apostles are released from jail, the angel tells them to go back to the temple and carry on preaching 'the full message of this life.' (5:20)

Last Sunday we celebrated Easter. It is the heart of our faith, the fact that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. This was part of the core message that the disciples preached in Jerusalem and continues to be proclaimed by Christians today. Earlier in Acts, the disciples said to the people of Jerusalem:

"You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this." (Acts 3:15)

They saw that the resurrection showed not that Jesus was God's anointed one, but that he was the author of life, the one who could rescue us from the power of death and sin. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:56-58:

"The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:56-58)

In Christ, we have victory over death. Only Christ can bring us eternal life. Isn't this the most valuable truth to share with others?

We can be confident that this good news is valuable.

But is it true?

#### **So why can we be confident in its truth? - Gamaliel's Speech**

When the apostles are re-arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council that condemned Jesus to be crucified, Peter gives a bold speech, which leaves them on the point of killing them too.

But, at that point, a prominent Pharisee, called Gamaliel, stands up and makes an interesting argument that helps us see why we can be confident that the gospel about Jesus is true.

For Gamaliel, the issue at stake is whether the Christian movement is from God or not. If it is not, he argues that it will simply die out. If it is from God, he says then it is pointless trying to stop it, because you will be fighting God!

Why does he say that the movement would die out if it wasn't from God? Because he says that is what happened to similar movements at the time. He gives two examples of two movements focussed on powerful leaders. In both cases, when the leader was killed, his followers gave up and the movement died out. They had already killed Jesus, if this movement is not from God, then it two would die out.

You might want to counter this argument and say, I can think of movements that haven't died out when the leader died. After all what about the other major religions. Islam didn't stop when Mohammed died, it carried on expanding. Similarly Buddhism didn't fizzle out when Buddha died. Yet, the difference is that both Buddha and Mohammed were around and teaching for much longer than Jesus and the religions they taught were based on a way of life rather than a message about a person. Christianity stands or falls on the person of Jesus and he was killed after only three years of teaching. Surely, after his death you would expect his movement to die out! That is if the resurrection did not happen.

But it did not die out. Rather it grew and spread into a variety of cultures around the world and continues to spread around the world today. Christianity has passed Gamaliel's test. The passion and bravery of those first disciples in convincing so many so quickly to follow Jesus points to the truth of what they claimed to have witnessed. Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead and he can bring us eternal life.

We can have confidence in the good news about Jesus.

But, how can we have courage to share the good news about Jesus?

### **How can we have courage to share the Good News about Jesus?**

I think there are five things in this part of Acts that can help us see why the apostles were so courageous and are essential for us to have courage to. The first two come from the context, the other three from Peter's speech at the Sanhedrin.

#### **Context:**

##### **1. Prayer - 4:29-30**

Firstly, behind their courage was prayer. In these early chapters of Acts, Luke emphasises that the disciples gathered together to pray.

While they were waiting for the Holy Spirit to come in chapter 1, what did they do? They prayed.

When the disciples were arrested and told to stop teaching about Jesus the first time, what did they do? They prayed. In particular that time they prayed for God to enable them to speak the word with great boldness. The miracle of the release from prison and the boldness in carrying on preaching when they had just been arrested showed that God answered their prayer!

Let's take prayer seriously and let's pray for boldness to share the good news, for God to work in hearts and minds to turn people to him.

Let's pray as part of our Sunday services, at our daily prayer meetings, 4 times each week and in other small groups when we meet and let's pray for courage to share the gospel.

## **2. Community - 4:32-36**

Secondly, the apostles were part of and supported by a deeply committed and generous community, where everyone was cared for and looked after.

God does not call us to be lone wolf disciples. We need the support and care of one another if we are to be able to stand up and speak courageously about Jesus.

Also, the invitation to come to find life in Christ includes an invitation to become part of his family. If the family is dysfunctional, then the message is undermined, but if our communities are a good place to be a part of, the that will add to the attractiveness of the gospel.

Let's be concerned to build strong communities of faith.

### **Peter's Speech:**

That's the context in which the apostles speak boldly about their faith, but Peter's short speech in the Sanhedrin, also reveals what enables them to have the courage to speak about Jesus despite the threats against them.

## **3. The command of God - 5:29**

The third point, is that what they are doing is obeying God! The Sanhedrin may have claimed to have the authority to tell them to stop talking about Jesus, but the disciples recognised that their authority came below that of God's.

When we seek to tell people about Jesus, others may tell us we should not or look upset or annoyed that we are doing so. That may be because we are doing so in an insensitive or unhelpful way - and we need to be careful not to do that.

However, ultimately if we are serious as Christians, then we know that we have to do what God tells us to do, even if it upsets, angers or annoys those who seem to have power over us.

## **4. The example of Jesus Christ - 5:30-31**

Fourthly, there is the example of Christ. What is remarkable is that Peter stands before the Sanhedrin the very ones who condemned Jesus to die and does not bow in fear.

Why? Well because of what he tells them: that the one they had hung on a tree to die, had now been raised by God and was seated at God's right hand.

In other words, you can do whatever you like to me, as you did to Jesus, but I trust that like Jesus God will ultimately give me his life.

It is the very gospel message that gives Peter the courage to speak the gospel message.

And for us too, we need to see that whatever people may threaten to do to us, it is nothing compared with the glorious resurrection that we have in following Jesus.

## 5. The partnership of the Holy Spirit - 5:32

Finally, Peter's courage comes from knowing that he has the Holy Spirit. We do not witness to the Christian message alone. The Holy Spirit is working with us, to witness to the great truth about Jesus. In Acts, that is the role of the Holy Spirit that is emphasised.

Jesus said to the disciples just before he ascended into heaven:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

After they prayed in chapter 4, it says:

"After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." (Acts 4:31)

God does not leave us powerless to speak, rather he gives us the strength and the words we need when we need it through the work of the Holy Spirit

### **Confident and Courageous?**

We live in a contested culture, where conflicting ideas and philosophies can knock our confidence in the gospel and where we can be intimidated into not wanting to speak about Jesus.

Of course there is wisdom in knowing when it is wise to speak and when best to be quiet. We need to share the good news with sensitivity and gentleness and preferably in the context of good relationships.

Yet, there are moments when we know it is right to take the opportunity to speak about Jesus and what stops us is lack of courage.

As we read through Acts and look at the example of the apostles, we can see that we have every reason to be confident that the gospel is a message of life for all that is truly from God and that as part of God's people we can gain courage to speak this wonderful truth.