

Acts 4:1- 31 sermon 5.7.2020 – They had been with Jesus

On Tuesday I received an email from one of our good friends in Pakistan. He told us about a Christian friend of his with whom he had grown up. His friend had bought a house in an area of a city in Pakistan. A couple of weeks later a neighbour had confronted him in the street wanting to know if he was a Muslim. When he said that he was a Christian the neighbour told him that he shouldn't be living here – this is a Muslim area. Over the next few weeks there were repeated threats and bullying, even his children started harassing the children of this Christian man. Finally a few days ago this Muslim neighbour burst into the Christian man's house, shot him three times in the stomach, shot his wife and also his brother and then ran out. After extensive surgery the Christian man died a day or two later. Persecution of Christians is a part of life in many countries of the world. The question that arises from our passage today is how do you pray for those who are persecuting you and how do you pray for your situation? Luke records how the early Christians now face persecution. How do they respond?

This is probably my favourite passage in Acts. There are 4 quotable quotes we are going to look at.

Three sections in this passage:

1. v. 1-4 – arrest of apostles
2. v. 5-22 – trial of apostles (or is it actually the high priest and rulers on trial?)
3. v. 23-31 – the response of the community

4 quotable quotes:

v.10 - It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

v. 12 - Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

v. 19-20 - But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! ²⁰ As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

v. 29-30 - Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

It strikes me as we read through this chapter and certainly all these early chapters of Acts that a lot is happening. It's high octane stuff! There are people proclaiming the message about Jesus; in v.2 of chapter 4 the leaders in the Jewish community are "greatly disturbed"; arrests, people put into jail; warnings. There's

something different about these disciples – there’s a courage that they just wouldn’t have expected from a bunch of uneducated, ordinary men.

It’s interesting to compare what is happening here with what Jesus said to the disciples in Luke 21:12-19. It’s taking place in the Temple and I’ll go back a bit to v.10.

¹⁰ Then he said to them: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.

*¹² “But before all this, **they will seize you and persecute you**. They will hand you over to synagogues [to be put on trial] and **put you in prison**, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. ¹³ And **so you will bear testimony to me**. ¹⁴ But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. ¹⁵ **For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict**. ¹⁶ You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷ **Everyone will hate you because of me**. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ Stand firm, and you will win life.”*

Many of these things were taking place even as early as chapter 4 – so we’re talking about a couple of months after Jesus’ resurrection.

Let’s take a look at what they say:

v.9 – Peter starts by saying that what they did was basically an act of kindness – healing a lame man; but as he warms up, he says actually it shows more – you want to know what it really shows

v. 10 – It’s by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth (there’s that line again, “the name of Jesus” – seems like every second sentence the apostles state is about this Jesus’ name); “WHOM YOU CRUCIFIED” – a bold statement in the light of where they are standing – it was the same place where Jesus stood just a couple of months before; BUT WHOM GOD RAISED FROM THE DEAD – this is the dramatic statement; THAT THIS MAN STANDS BEFORE YOU HEALED – this is the real reason that he is healed; to show that Jesus’ power is here and that he has indeed been raised from the dead. Notice no leader offers to go and get the dead body or show the grave where he now lies, because there is no body or grave containing him.

v.11 So Peter goes on, quotes Psalm 118 – Jesus is the stone that was rejected but that God has made the cornerstone, the most important stone that holds the whole structure together. Do you get what he’s saying to these leaders? You think you are the leaders of the Jews, of the Jewish nation – no way, Jesus is the cornerstone – and you rejected him. Jesus himself quoted this Psalm in Luke 20 when he was telling the parable of the vineyard. And the religious leaders knew that Jesus was pointing the finger at them when he

quoted this psalm. Now Peter makes it even more personal. Instead of quoting the psalm exactly which says “the builders” he says, “YOU builders”. The word rejected also is a lot stronger than our word rejected. It actually means “scorned”. So they didn’t just reject Jesus but they looked down on him, despised him, put him down.

And now quotable quote No.2 – “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” This is an absolute statement. They don’t say “well, here is a very important person that can help you.” No, it’s THERE IS NO ONE ELSE – no one else can save you. So to these Jewish leaders Peter says “Only Jesus”; Only Jesus can save you; Only Jesus is the Messiah; You can’t stand before God unless you come through Jesus.

Today this statement by Peter is still not popular. How dare Christians make such an exclusivist claim. How arrogant these Christians are!! How intolerant! We are told we must be inclusive, and I totally agree with this. But what they mean is you must accept my claim, and his claim, and her claim, and their claim – doesn’t matter if it is true or life-giving or not. You are not allowed to challenge or seek to question in order to determine what is true.

The chief priests had their own little kingdom there in Jerusalem. They controlled the religion. They decided who could do what and when. And basically the decision that everyone needs to come down to is this – whose kingdom are you going to be in – who is your king? Peter says that there is only one king, one Saviour. Many people make the decision that they want to be the king of their decisions, so Jesus is rejected. We all need to make this decision – whose kingdom are you going to be in – your own or Jesus’.

A note about the temple. Irony – many of the clashes take place in the Temple. What was the significance of the temple? The place where God dwelt. It was the most sacred place for any Jew. The Jewish leaders jealously guarded their authority over everything that went on in the temple. The disciples are saying well actually God has now taken up residence in a new Temple – this big building is redundant. The new temple is the heart of the people who believe in Jesus, his death and resurrection. The holy Spirit has taken up residence in every new follower of Jesus. The Temple is not a building anymore – the temple is a living breathing yet hidden place – in every believer.

So when Peter and John address the Jewish leaders from v.8 they are given words to say. They speak with conviction, clarity (it’s very clear) and power. In v.13 we read that the leaders are “astonished” – these guys hadn’t gone to rabbinic school (the equivalent of Bible College or theological college) or had a privileged educated background.

And then my favourite phrase in all of Acts – “they took note that these men had been with Jesus” – there was something distinctive about these guys – they had been with Jesus. Wouldn’t that be great if people said of us – “Oh, yes, Arthur, yeah he’s been with Jesus”; “yes, you can tell Di has been with Jesus”. Now probably for these Jewish leaders it’s more the idea that these guys had associated themselves with Jesus. And this was a reason for looking down on them. But we continue to read to see that Jesus’ promise from Luke 21 came true – the leaders could say nothing. Jesus words, ***For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict***, had come true.

Again the tragic thing is that the Jewish leaders are not wanting to find the truth. When they send Peter and John and the formerly lame man out of the room to confer together their first question is not, “What do you think about Jesus?” but “What are we going to do with these men?” Note how they talk – “we’ve got to stop THIS THING and we must warn them not to speak to anyone in THIS NAME.” They can’t even say Jesus’ name such is their hatred, their stubbornness, their pride. This will be the response of many people around us. We think we’ve got a persuasive argument, the truth, but people will continue to reject Jesus. For a variety of reasons, but probably uppermost is the fact that they will have to admit they are wrong and that they need Jesus. I don’t need anyone else. Repentance is a hard thing for us.

CS Lewis says, “[Repentance] means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into... It means killing part of yourself, under-going a kind of death.” It means change. I don’t want change; I’m happy with what I have; just leave me alone. Just leave me to muddle on my own.

v.18-20 – another classic line. Quotable quote No 3 - “What is right in God’s eyes, to listen to you, or to God?” Obvious answer!!! “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” It’s the truth and you know it. It would be wrong for us to say nothing.

v. 21 – all they can think about is how to shut them up and to punish them. At this stage they just threaten them. We will see that things go further in the following chapters.

v. 23-31 – we see a wonderful response to the imprisoning of Peter and John. Remember Peter and John had gone the previous day just to pray and within the previous 24 hours they’d been put in jail for healing a man and appeared before the Jewish ruling council. So after they report back to everyone they all pray together.

What do we notice in this prayer?

1. v.24 - the reminder that God is sovereign and creator of everything
2. v.25-26 – quoting Psalm 2 begins with questioning, before God, why the nations are in such an uproar, and the rulers scheming and plotting. And then there’s the reminder that for much of her history the

Jews had been surrounded by kings who were against them. The rest of the psalm goes on to describe the fact that God will bring his rule of peace through his Son, the anointed one.

3. v.27 – then they recount how this conspiring against God and his anointed one can be seen in their day through Pilate and Herod, who put to death Jesus, the anointed one.
4. v. 28 – but they are aware that even the wicked deeds of these rulers are not outside God’s will. The wickedness of rulers is held in check by, and contained within, the overall purposes of God.
5. v.29-30 – and now comes the 4th quotable quote – it would be quite reasonable to say, “Lord please cause the Jewish leaders to die horribly”; or “Please stop them being so unpleasant”. But not even, “lord, let this persecution stop!” or even “Please convert the authorities, so that your work can go forward.” What do they say though: a. Look at their threats; b. let us go on speaking boldly; c. will you please continue to work powerfully”.

We need to learn this type of praying – these three things – the opposition are there and God knows about them; we are here and we need to be faithful, to continue to speak of Jesus boldly and confidently; and here is the power of God, which is not in our possession but which, because of Jesus, will continue to be at work to set up signposts pointing people to the new thing which is happening through him. We need to learn to pray with confidence like this. This is the kind of prayer our brothers and sisters in Pakistan, and other countries where there is persecution, can pray.

We can pray this prayer, too, today and repeatedly. It reminds us that there is a battle going on – sometimes with actual official authorities; sometimes it is with the spirit of the age; sometimes it is an internal battle, with wrong attitudes or habits that I have fostered over the years. When we come to speak about Jesus, about his cross, about his resurrection, about the new life which can break chains and set people free and do things in his name there seem to be powers around, which may well be unseen, that are wanting to do their best to oppose what you are doing.

Luke primarily wrote Acts to provide assurance to his readers concerning the purposes and plan of God. He was also recording the “continuing story” of the fulfilment of God’s purposes and God’s promises for his people. So Luke is not recording every incident but records incidents that show God’s purposes clearly and especially this idea of the fulfilment of God’s plan. So there are many references to the OT in the sermons which shows that this is the continuation of God’s story that had started in the OT. It is also a confirmation about the truths of the gospel as these Christians faced ongoing persecution.