

Acts 5.27-42
(17-26; 6.1-7)
John 15.1-4

St John's
8.7.18

Obedience & Expansion

How do you summarise this dramatic, fast-moving story we have been going through in the Acts of the Apostles?

If you were reading it for the first time it would be much more exciting than the best of novels or films or TV serials on offer today.

The penny dropped on the Day of **Pentecost** – (*Penny didn't remember the event!*)

and what a completely **unexpected** penny it was. Jesus, Who had been crucified, had kept appearing to His followers, apparently **alive**.

That must be **good**, but what was it all about?

The puzzle was **lifted** from them by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and it dawned on them that Jesus was not only alive, but **with** them, and open to everybody **else**, from that time **on**.

As He was later to put it to John the Divine in the Book of Revelation,

““He was dead, but now He was alive – promising resurrection to all of us who trust in Him.

It was Good News for **everybody**, and profoundly **shocking** to the authorities who had had Jesus crucified.

And the Apostles didn't hold back their punches: “You killed the Author of life, but God raised

Him from the dead. We are witnesses of this”.
(3.15)

It was so incredible they had to shout it out from the housetops.

And they **lived** the Good News as well.

Jesus was continuing His **healing** ministry through them,

as “the apostles performed many miraculous signs among the people”. (5.12)

And they were modelling a system of **social justice**, which seriously challenges the scandalous economic injustices of our world today,

as they shared “all things in common”, so that “there *were* no needy persons among them”.

(4.32,34)

That is as **radical** today, as it was in those days the Roman Empire.

One of the fruits of their message was that “more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (5.14) – the rapid **growth** of the embryonic church.

So, the religious authorities “were filled with jealousy” –

why weren't **they** making the **impact** and experiencing the **popularity** the Apostles were enjoying?

Not an unusual feeling among the different churches today – “why is that church more successful than ours?”.

We heard the reaction of the Jewish authorities a couple of weeks ago, and this morning we will hear the story repeated **again** – in Ch 5.

“They arrested the Apostles and put them in the public jail.” (5.18)

But this time God **intervened** –

an angel opened the **doors** of the prison during the night

and instructed them to go back to the temple court and **continue** offering the Good News to the people – which they did, but at **frightening** cost to themselves.

In a minute we will hear this part of the story from the Book of Acts,

and consider what **motivated** the Apostles to be so determined to make known the Good News of Jesus, in the face of such powerful opposition and suffering.

But we can also see, as we read on in Acts, that suffering was not the **only** challenge that faced them.

In the next chapter, their generous **sharing** between rich and poor was itself causing problems of **organisation**, and the opposition was turning to outright **persecution**.

But meanwhile, Lynne is going to read this part of the story – the aftermath of the Apostles' miraculous escape from prison. (4 ½ mins)

Acts 5.27-42

So a dead man came **alive** again!

They saw it with their very eyes.

If you had witnessed such an amazing miracle, could **you** keep quiet about it?

Now it may be helpful to keep the page open in the Bibles – they’re at the end of the pews if you haven’t located one – we’re on p1097, Acts Ch 5 – and we can see in v27 that there was **also** every motivation for the Apostles to keep their mouths **shut**.

They were being questioned by an audience much more **hostile** than we are likely to encounter – the Sanhedrin – the council of the Jewish lawyers and teachers.

And we need to avoid reading antisemitism into the New Testament, because the challenge for the Apostles was not that they were standing before Jews – they were Jews themselves –

it was that they were up against the powerful **establishment**.

They were speaking truth to power.

Peter’s defence of the Gospel to them was in very simple, and challenging, terms.

V30: “The God of **our** fathers...” – reminding them that it was the God Whom they were supposed to represent Whom they were working against -

“The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead, Whom you had killed by hanging Him on a tree” – pointing out that it was they who had, in effect, murdered their Messiah.

The apostles went on to make clear that **Jesus** was now the true authority, in v31: “God exalted Him to His own right hand as Prince and Saviour”.

He is our **Prince**, sovereign over all that happens in this world,

and calling us to repentance, which means turning around and following Him instead of pleasing ourselves.

And He is our **Saviour**, saving humanity from the **burden** of the mess we all make of our lives, and of the world around us, by giving us “forgiveness of sins”.

“Raised from the dead”, and “Prince and Saviour” –

How do we know that’s true?

How can we be sure?

The answer is in v32: “We (the Apostles) are witnesses of these things” –

and we have their witness statements in the New Testament – and that’s why we need to keep **reading** it – and the Old Testament that leads up to it – it is our **daily** bread.

Jesus is the One Who the world around us tries to ignore – but with Whom we come face to face in the Gospels, and Whom everybody will have to face eventually.

But meanwhile, Christians face all kinds of suffering that puts the world’s challenges to **us** into context.

In v40 we see the authorities had the Apostles **flogged**, probably with the Jewish 40 stripes save one.

That could at times be fatal ...

but in v41, they “left the Sanhedrin **rejoicing**”!

How could they rejoice at such a cruel, painful and humiliating punishment?

They probably **were** in agony, and would be in shock,

but they also rejoiced at being “counted **worthy** of suffering disgrace for the Name” of Jesus.

Well, suffering can build us **up** to recognising how dependent we are on “the Holy Spirit, Whom God has given to those who obey Him”.

Standing up for Jesus, whether in words, attitudes or deeds, can sometimes be a **lonely** place.

While we mustn’t forget that people will often respect us for it,

it can at other times bring **hostility** and

unpopularity –

can we **embrace** it, in the grace of God?

But identifying ourselves with Jesus, in front of others, has other consequences as well – more **positive** ones, repeated several times in the Acts of the Apostles.

We see the early church being blessed with numerical **growth** – vigorous, fast and miraculous growth, in the thousands –

“more and more men and women” in v14.

Even the authorities had to grudgingly admit, in v28,

that “you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching”.

This is the **fruit** we can bear if we remain in Jesus the true vine,

as we shall hear in the short Gospel passage later on in the service.

So is the growth of the church to be our primary **motivation** for standing up for Jesus?

Is it the need for numerical growth that **drives** us? It's a tricky question, because sometimes: Christians try their best to represent Jesus to the world around them, or a church is full of generosity in giving to the Lord's work in the world – impeccable in obedience – and no apparent growth at all. It can **happen**.

But Gamaliel's counsel in v39 still stands in the long run: "If their purpose is from God, you will not be able to stop them" – because the good fruit from our obedience will prevail in the end.

So who **is** this Gamaliel? V34 tells us he was a Pharisee, and a teacher of the Jewish law. The Pharisees get a bad press in the Gospels because many of them were so **paranoid** at the success of Jesus' teaching that they spent much energy undermining Him. They were very religious, and were passionate in upholding the observance of the law to the letter. But some were more *fanatical* than others, as is the case in **today's** political and religious movements. But God armed Gamaliel with a bit of **wisdom**. He was also well read, and knew his **history**, as we can see in his reminders about the rebels Theudas and Judas in vs36 & 37. He was a **professor**, really,

and one of his pupils was the enthusiastic young man **Saul**, whom God radically changed into the Apostle **Paul**, and reversed the direction of his enthusiasm from persecuting the church to extending it.

So let's look at Gamaliel's counsel. V38: "Let these men go! For if their purpose and activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God". Compare Gamaliel's counsel to **Peter's** response to the Sanhedrin, both in his previous defence and repeated here in v29: "We must obey God rather than men". Gamaliel must have been quite impressed by Peter's appeal to Divine authority. Had he seen that the question, "is it of God, or is it of men?" also condemned the Sanhedrin's stance? – they **wrongly** assumed they were motivated by God. Is all **we** do as a church, or as individuals, motivated by God?

Well, what is the **word** that stands out in Peter's defence in v29, and repeated in the Apostles' appeal to the Holy Spirit, in v32? "We must **obey** God rather than men!" "We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, Whom God has given to those who **obey** Him".

So, what is God's **vision** for us as a church – the vision we have been seeking – which we are to **obey**?

It will have something to do with the world's need of the **witness** of the Apostles that God has "exalted Jesus to His own right hand as Prince and Saviour".

He was "dead, and now is alive for ever and ever".

So **can** we keep quiet about that?

Or, do we find ourselves **tongue-tied** in the face of the complacent world we live in?

In v19, when the Apostles were in prison, "the Lord opened the doors of the jail" and directed them to go to the temple again and tell out "the full message of this new life".

What doors does the Lord need to open for us?

If we are to represent Jesus in the world as His ambassadors, what is our **motivation**?

Isn't it simply that we want to **obey** Him, as the apostles sought to obey God rather than anything of human origin?

Our **motivation** is obedience, and the God-given **fruit** of our obedience will be the growth of the church.

So what is our response to v42?

"Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ".

The temple courts and the houses the apostles visited were the places where God was opening for **them** the windows of opportunity.

Where are **our** “temple courts” and our “house to house” where God is opening windows for us and where people are waiting to listen?

(13-14 mins)

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for the Good News that You have raised Jesus as Prince and Saviour. Show us the windows of opportunity You are opening for us to obey Your commission, and pour Your Spirit on us to be Your ambassadors, bringing Your compassion to this Your world – send us out in Jesus’ name.