

Rather than speak on our Gospel reading, which is the traditional thing to do, I've chosen today to speak on the passage we heard earlier from the Book of Acts. The Gospel reading from John 10 is a marvellously powerful passage, especially when linked to Ps23, but the passage from Acts, it seems to me, has something to say to us as a church as we seek to bear witness to the Lord Jesus Christ in a culture that is not always that friendly to our message.

Let me give you a bit of background. As you probably know, the Book of Acts was written by St Luke, the author of Luke's Gospel. It records the witness of the early church to the crucified and risen Jesus beginning in Jerusalem and gradually spreading outwards from there until, by the end of Acts, we find St Paul living under house arrest in Rome, the very centre of imperial power and, as St Luke puts it, 'preaching openly about the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Our reading from Acts 4 is set early in the piece. The spread of the gospel is still largely confined to Jerusalem and its local area, and the infant church is still following the Jewish pattern of gathering in homes for fellowship and at the temple for worship. Sometime after the day of Pentecost Peter and John, the disciples who had been closest to Jesus, are about to enter the temple for prayer, when a man who was lame from birth asks them for alms. In the KJV Peter responds to him with words which some of you may remember from a Sunday School song, saying to him, 'Silver and gold have I none, but that which I have, I give thee, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth I say to you stand up and walk.' Luke records that the man was healed instantly and entered the temple, 'walking and leaping and praising God!' Well, naturally this draws a crowd who want to know how this man was healed. Peter and John immediately point out that the man has not been healed by their power or piety, but through faith in the name of Jesus, and they begin preaching about the cross and resurrection of Jesus. But then the temple authorities arrive on the scene and Peter and John are arrested and held in custody overnight for a hearing on the next day. Luke records that the authorities included some from a group called the Sadducees, and that they were annoyed because Peter and John, were 'teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.' That makes sense because the

Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection of the body, so no wonder they're annoyed that the disciples are proclaiming, right in the temple precinct, the resurrection of Jesus. It probably annoyed them even more that people were responding to Peter and John's preaching. Luke tells us that about 5000 believed – so this was a very receptive crowd.

Today's reading follows on from this and provides an account of what happened next. Luke tells us: *'The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family.* What Luke is describing here is a meeting of the Sanhedrin, which was a seventy-member group, including numbers of Sadducees, which was presided over by the high priest. It formed the supreme court of the nation, and it had the power to make judgements in all cases except those involving capital punishment. So, this is a pretty heavy scene. The hearing begins with a question, the court asks: *"By what power or by what name did you do this?"* Peter's reply pulls no punches:

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 ¹⁰ 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,^[d] whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead . . . and ¹² "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved."

Let me draw out from this episode a few points for your consideration.

We can't be sure what the initial attitude of the court was to Peter and John but given that they had been brought before the court because they had annoyed the Sadducees, and also that Annas and Caiaphas had been instrumental in the plot to have Jesus crucified, the court is unlikely to have been positive – in fact it's far more likely that it was quite hostile. There must have been a temptation, don't you think, for Peter and John to placate the court by modifying their witness to some degree. You see, in what they had been preaching to the crowds before their arrest, and in their testimony to the court, there was plenty which orthodox Jews, as well

as the Sadducees, would find objectionable if not offensive. But they don't dilute their message, they proclaim the same message to the crowds who were receptive and to the court which they would have presumed to be hostile.

Well, brothers and sisters, the society around us includes various groupings of people and cultures, some of which may be receptive and some hostile to the Christian message – but like Peter and John, regardless of whether our audience is receptive or hostile, we are called to be unswerving in our witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, it's worth noticing that the opportunity to bear witness to Jesus, both to the crowd and to the court, arose because of what Peter described to the Sanhedrin as '*a good deed done to someone who was sick.*' Granted, it was a fairly spectacular good deed, but Peter doesn't emphasise its spectacular nature, at heart it's a good deed done in the name of Jesus and through faith in his name. We need to be aware, I think, that God sometimes uses such good deeds, done in the name of Jesus, to create opportunities for witness. The thing is that, when these opportunities come along, we need to be ready and if you're anything like me you might find it difficult to respond off the cuff in the moment. If that's the case I encourage you to take some time to think about why you believe in Jesus and what faith means in your life and write your thoughts down in dot points. Doing that will clarify your own thinking and help you give a coherent answer to those who ask you about your faith.

The third point I'd make is that when Peter and John get an opportunity to speak, they're very clear about their message. If you look at their preaching to the crowds, in the passage immediately preceding our reading, and their testimony to the Sanhedrin, you will see that they have a clear and consistent message, and the message emphasises that salvation is found through the cross and resurrection of Jesus and through faith in his name. That is the core message of the Christian gospel! It's a message that, then and now, has a capacity to cause offence and provoke animosity. Peter and John later find themselves threatened on account of their witness; I suspect we're more likely to be fearful of being ridiculed. And yet every week in our liturgy we affirm 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.' The resurrection of

Jesus is the vindication of the salvation God has created through the cross and offers to each of us. If the resurrection and thus the truth of the cross, was true in 33AD, it's true today, and if it is true at all, it is true for all, and if it's true for all, we have a duty to take the opportunities God gives us to share it with others.

You might argue, though, that today we live in a multicultural society and we're aware that there are other faiths that claim to present the truth about God and humanity and the ways in which we should live, and we know there are those of no faith who seek to live well and make a positive difference in the world. It might, then, seem to us and to others somewhat arrogant or intolerant to claim that Jesus is the only way to salvation and that, as Peter put it, *'there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.'*

Well, the thing is, that Peter and John also lived in a multicultural society in which people adhered to different beliefs but that didn't stop them bearing witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, we can't hear the tone of voice in which Peter and John shared their witness to the cross and resurrection of Jesus, but I suggest that with both the crowds and the Sanhedrin, it's unlikely that they put their message across in a way that was arrogant or aggressive. In fact, writing later to Christians who were experiencing some persecution, Peter tells them that they should always be ready to give an answer for the hope they have within them, but to do it with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 3.15-16). The Christian gospel is a challenging message – it challenges existing belief structures, whether faith based or secular, and it challenges our own sense of self sufficiency. It's clearly counter-productive for us to add offence by being arrogant or aggressive in the way in which we share our faith. The theologian D.T. Niles once described sharing faith in Christ as 'one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.' If you're a beggar saved by grace, which we all are, there's no room for arrogance!

To close, let say that sometimes the way Christians speak about salvation can sound abrasive and off-putting. It might be helpful to note for that, as it's used in the Bible, 'salvation' generally refers to a process of restoration to God and restoration by God. In some ways it might be better

translated as 'healing' – and in fact often it is translated that way. Salvation refers to God's healing in all aspects of life. I am saved, I am healed, in that I'm reconciled to God through faith in Christ, I'm also being healed as the Holy Spirit reshapes my attitudes and life, day by day, to reflect the life of Jesus, and I will be healed finally when raised with Jesus into glory. To present salvation – which is to present the life of faith - as a process in which God brings healing to our lives may make it sound less arrogant to us and less objectionable to others.

All that said, the message of this passage is that, regardless of the receptivity or animosity of our surrounding culture, we cannot refrain from bearing witness by word as well as deed, to God's good news of salvation – or healing – in Jesus. Nor are we at liberty to dilute in any way the message of the cross and resurrection as the means by which God's healing comes to us, because, as Peter put it, *"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved."*