

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Acts 5:12-42 - The first persecution of the Church

A few months ago I was on holiday in an inland Welsh town. Whilst waiting, somewhat impatiently, for my wife, I ambled along the main street looking at anything that took my attention. Suddenly I was aware of a memorial stone which was standing adjacent to a small open square. Upon the stone, which I first thought was a dedication to the dead of the First World War, was a plaque recording the names of two men burned at the stake during the terrible years surrounding the reformation. It struck me then, as it has done many times, that religion provokes strong feelings. It always seems strange that men, who claimed to be followers of Jesus, could persecute each other in such savage and cruel ways.

The sad thing is that such treatment was meted out from one part of the church against another. The passage of scripture we are going to look at this morning, which is from the Acts 5:17-42, brings before us the details of the persecution of the early church. That such events would befall His followers was foretold by the Lord Jesus in John 15:20, "Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you."

This oppression was not Christian against Christian but arose from a section of the Temple priests in Jerusalem. From the context we can see that the apostles and disciples of Jesus had been vigorously evangelising in the Name of Jesus. This caused much concern to certain of the priestly party because the preaching was bringing many of the people to believe in Jesus. Acts 4 tells of the arrest of Peter and John after they had conducted a preaching campaign following the healing of a lame man. This imprisonment, according to Acts 4:2, was because they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead. On this occasion both of the apostles were released after a warning not to continue to preach or teach in the Name of Jesus. Needless to say, they did not heed the warning, neither did they concur with it as a condition of their release. The scripture record tells us that as soon as they were back on the streets they went to the company of Christians in Jerusalem and got their support for the stand they had taken before the chief priests and rulers. Thus the whole church in Jerusalem was united in continuing to evangelise despite the obvious dangers from the Temple authorities.

Following this solemn warning regarding their future conduct, the disciples went to witness in one of the most public places in the city. This was in Solomon's porch, where many signs and wonders were done amongst the crowds that gathered there. As a consequence, more believers, both men and women, were added to the church. Again, Scripture makes clear that all the believers were united in this open and public witness to the Lord. The second arrest of some of the leading disciples was therefore inevitable.

Acts 5:17 tells us two things about the arrest. Firstly that it was mainly the activities of the Sadducees, of which the high priest was one, that caused the imprisonment of the apostles. Secondly, that it was indignation which made the Sadducees more determined to inflict greater punishment upon the prisoners than a mere verbal warning. That this was no surprise to the apostles is obvious. They were not unintelligent men. They continued in their open air witness at Solomon's Porch knowing that they would have to bear the consequences of their actions. This is a lesson for all the servants of the Lord. If we serve Him faithfully, we might have to suffer personally. For the majority of us it will not mean imprisonment, but there could be financial implications or the prospect of social exclusion.

If we examine the word "indignation" as recorded in verse 17 of our passage it will reveal further insights into the action of the Sadducees. This will help us to understand why they acted as they did. This word is sometimes translated as "zeal" and sometimes as "envy". It would not be stretching the scripture to suggest that both of these motivated the Sadducees. That they were zealous for the reputation of the Temple and its services goes without saying. The testimony of the Israelites to the holiness and authority of the living God had a long and recognised history. Neither would they be other than human if they had not exhibited a measure of envy at the obvious popularity and success of the preaching of the apostles. These two elements of zeal and envy seem to be present in much of the persecution that has marked religious history. We need to be zealous in our service for Him but not to the point of persecuting others. As we shall see later, persecution will not hide the truth, neither will it commend it.

Verses 19 and 20 of our passage record that the apostles were released from prison during the night by an angel. Such a miraculous release was not without its influence upon the apostles. If they had wondered or doubted about the

validity of their service they were certainly given the assurance that they were doing the work of the Lord. Acts 5:19-20 states, "But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said, Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life."

Such a confirmation of the region of service or of the mind of the Lord is not granted to every servant but notice also that no pledge is given regarding their security. The letter to the Hebrews in chapter 11, that great chapter of the faithful, makes patently clear in verses 33 to 37 that some servants and witnesses escaped the edge of the sword whilst others had cruel mockings and scourgings. What is promised to the faithful disciple is the presence of the Lord in all of the experiences of life. That the apostles were faithful is shown by their reaction to the command of the angel to go and preach. For some the natural result of being miraculously freed would be to escape to safety. In fact, some have questioned the purpose of the escape if they were to suffer imprisonment again. Such thoughts seemed far from the apostles for instead of seeking safety they went straight to the Temple to teach the people openly and within sight of all.

We have to admire the stand that these ordinary men were taking. Without influence in high places or any avenue of escape they returned to the public place to preach in the name of the crucified Jesus and to claim that He was the anointed Messiah of the nation and was risen from amongst the dead. We know that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the body and they certainly could not accept that the carpenter's son from Nazareth could be the longed for Messiah. Thus these two groups were on a collision course with the defenceless disciples due to come off worse. We must not minimise their danger with the wonderful essence of hindsight. These were real men who felt pain and who could suffer anguish like all men. Fidelity to Christ made them willing to face the possibility of further imprisonment. We must also remember that they had already spent sometime in the common prison with all the indignities associated with such a place. I say again, we must admire the stand these men were taking for the sake of the Gospel.

When the sun arose upon the day that the Sanhedrin was to be convened for the trial of the apostles, all the members of that august senate assembled only to find the prisoners gone! Nobody seemed to have a clue as to their whereabouts. Perhaps I am reading more into the text than is there, but I suggest that if the members of the Sanhedrin had attended the areas of the Temple where the common people gathered they would have seen and heard the witness of the apostles. They would not then have been faced with the perturbing news that the apostles had escaped and their location was unknown. Perhaps they should have attended to their devotions first and to material matters later.

Eventually the news of the apostles' activities in the locality of the Temple was conveyed to the officials. Before we consider that, I would like us to notice the description of the content of the preaching which is given in Acts 5:20 which was quoted a few minutes ago. Here it was called "the words of this life." To the believer it hardly needs any emphasis to say that the message of Jesus concerns life. This does not only mean life after death as is sometimes mistakenly thought. The life that is in Christ is to be enjoyed and experienced here and now. It obviously includes a coming time but a quote from the writings of the apostle Paul makes my point clear. The following words are from his letter to the Philippians 3:8-10, "What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."

This quotation is from the New International Version of the Bible. It tells of the life offered to the disciples in the early church. This was what the apostles meant when they were preaching "all the words of this life" in the Temple precincts.

Their return to the Temple to preach caused the arrest of the apostles yet again. This time they were brought straight to the Sanhedrin for examination. Immediately they were accused by the high priest of ignoring the previous warning not to preach and of trying to place the responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus upon the Sanhedrin. We can see this plainly from verse 28 of our passage where the high priest shows a reluctance to articulate the name of Jesus. He refers to the Lord simply as "this man". There seems to have been a positive distaste of even pronouncing the name of Jesus.

Peter, however, shows no such reluctance for he immediately begins to preach in the name of Jesus. Neither does he mince his words regarding the responsibility for the death of Jesus. "Whom ye slew and hanged upon a tree" is the accusation of Peter to the assembled company. One might ask, "Who was being tried now?" It also has to be remembered that the apostles had had direct experience of the company of Jesus. They had witnessed the extent that certain of the leaders could go to in order to get rid of the person they considered to be a trouble maker. Consequently they had every right to accuse the tribunal that tried Jesus of being responsible for His death.

This was not the major element or constituent of the preaching for Peter and the other apostles because it was not blame for the death of Jesus but rather the great message of exaltation which they wanted to proclaim. We can see this from verse 31, "Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins."

The response to this declaration was immediate, for rage now seemed to take over rather than rational objectivity. The only end that could satisfy this animosity was the execution of the perpetrators. No doubt something serious would have befallen the apostles except for the intervention of Gamaliel, a respected member of the Sanhedrin and a Pharisee. By quoting various incidents from the recent history of occupied Israel, he set out a principle that we could all do well to learn if we haven't already done so. This is contained in verses 38 and 39, "And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God."

If only the various religious bodies who have generated persecution against each other over the years had practised such wisdom, many weak and defenceless people would have been spared much pain and torture. To inflict physical or emotional suffering upon other human beings can never be justified in any name, least of all in the Name of Him who gave His life to reveal to us the depths of the love of God.

As we look at the scripture before us it might appear as if the Sanhedrin accepted the words of Gamaliel at their face value. Their original inclination was to kill the apostles but in verse 40 we see that they agreed with Gamaliel and summoned the apostles back to the tribunal. Presumably they had been sent back to the prison or at least a guarded room whilst their fate was being decided. Again one does not have to have a vivid imagination to be aware of the feelings which must have crossed the minds of the apostles as they were brought back to face their accusers. That they were ready to die for their actions is obvious or else they would not have risked the anger of the rulers of the nation. This, however, would not stop them wondering what their fate would be. I repeat my previous remark that one has to admire the sheer courage of these unassuming men.

Verse 40 of our passage, besides telling us that the Sanhedrin agreed with Gamaliel, also says that they had the apostles beaten. The New International Version translates this punishment as having them flogged which, perhaps, brings before us the brutality of the punishment. For preaching in the Name of Jesus they had knowingly risked their lives and even if their lives were spared, we must never think that they got away without suffering. To be flogged was no light matter or negligible experience. Along side of that, they received yet another warning not to teach in the Name of Jesus. We must notice that the leaders didn't seem to mind what the disciples believed as long as they kept their beliefs to themselves. As in that age so in ours, for little notice will be taken if we keep our mouths shut and don't let our practices as Christians impinge upon the consciences of others.

It could also be the case today that the message of the preachers in today's church has become vague and ill-defined. The trumpet is sounding an uncertain sound to use another metaphor. The preaching of Peter and the other apostles centred around the death and resurrection of Jesus. They never deviated from that into by-ways of theological speculation. Perhaps today our message has, on too many occasions, become too soft and wide ranging, losing its biblical basis and moving away from the redemption which is in Christ into areas that are more akin to humanism. This is not to say that such concerns are not important but I am convinced that they are not the primary content of the preaching. Such a message could be unpopular and lead to ridicule and rejection but this is where we follow in the footsteps of the preachers in the Acts and remain on message. This attitude could be summarised by the words of a children's hymn which I learned many years ago.

*"Dare to be a Daniel,
Dare to stand alone,
Dare to have a purpose firm,
And dare to make it known".*

Daniel, of course, was the man who was thrown into the lion's den because of his faithfulness to God.

If we now return to the story of the apostles in the Acts 5 we see that they were released after being beaten and warned not to speak in the name of Jesus. Verse 41 of our chapter records that far from being dejected they walked away rejoicing that they had been counted worthy of suffering shame for the name of Jesus. They seemed to have had an entirely different view of things than we do in our world. They saw something positive in the situation despite its painful nature. Neither did it cause them to pause in their practice of Christianity or in the preaching of the good news of Jesus. The last verse of our chapter indicates that they carried on just as they had previously. Moving from house to house and visiting the Temple, they persevered, not allowing the threat of renewed persecution to deter them. I believe that over the centuries we have many examples of similar faithful service carried through by men and women in the face of oppression.

Many years ago I read a book about a Primitive Methodist Preacher called John Wedgwood. He travelled mainly in the Midlands evangelising with power and some success. In August 1817 he was preaching in the market-square at Grantham in Lincolnshire when he was arrested and imprisoned. Wedgwood describes this experience by the following words, *“After the constables took me down, they guarded me to the Town-Hall, where I had to sit in the prisoner’s chair, and a man to guard me, as though I had been a highwayman; and oh! what a host there was about the door! It was like a town in commotion. Some may wonder how I was provided for, being a prisoner, far from home and among strangers. I had a supply with me; but if I had been in a state of destitution, I could trust in the Lord, whose promise never fails. Well, there is encouragement to persevere and suffer in a good cause. I felt quite happy while I prayed and sung and preached to the prisoners. My stay in prison was only short. In a little over a fortnight I left my new habitation and my congregation of poor prisoners.”*

His sufferings were not great but John Wedgwood was faithful in carrying through the great commission of preaching the gospel despite the threat of persecution. May we, through God’s grace, be faithful servants and disciples in our day as Peter and John and Wedgwood and many others were in their day.

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