

## Acts 5:27-32 Sermon

It feels like a huge leap from Easter one week to the fifth chapter of Acts the next, and yet, this reading from Acts is really relevant. Last week we spoke of the confusion that Mary faced when understanding what had happened on Easter day. But something had happened. Mary had seen her Lord. This week, we start to unpack the implications of that simple message – that Jesus' followers had seen him risen from the dead, and couldn't and wouldn't stop talking about him. Whatever the authorities thought about it, these men and women were witnesses and were compelled to tell others what they saw. They are examples to us, who are also witnesses of what God has done for us, and who can also tell of our own journey of faith. We have seen the Lord, and nothing can stop us talking about it.

Between last week's resurrection and this week's events, a lot has happened. Jesus' has appeared to his friends and ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit has come upon his church, the apostles have performed many miracles and have come into conflict with the authorities and been ordered to stop talking about Jesus. Then, there have been more healings, provoking more opposition in Jerusalem, before they are arrested again and released from jail in the night by an angel. But in a story that reads a bit like a farce, they are back in the temple teaching about Jesus by the time the sun comes up! They then end up in front of the Jewish religious council again, this time interrogated by the high priest – such is the seriousness of the situation.

And it is a serious situation. The public law offences of the Roman world were serious and what Peter and the apostles were doing by defying them was deeply criminal with big consequences. So it is really important to understand what is going on here.

The high priest begins with what in the Greek is a rhetorical question – the kind of thing I'd say to my children when I notice the cookie jar is empty and they have chocolate round their mouths – Didn't I give you strict instructions not to do this? The high priest avoids even saying Jesus' name, just referring to him as 'this name.' They have 'filled Jerusalem' with chatter about Jesus and the story of Easter, and have been banned from talking any more and yet they have chosen to defy this ban.

Just for a moment, perhaps it's worth asking ourselves why they acted so defiantly as to disobey their own high priest. These were good Jewish men and therefore it is no little thing to act as they did. We tend to focus on their willingness to suffer for the story of Jesus, but we need to also remember the cultural and religious implications too. Here they are disobeying a direct order from the top religious and moral figure of their day – think the Pope or the Archbishop of Canterbury mixed with the Prime minister and police commissioner. Or perhaps even more accurately, think yourself into being a proud Russian Christian and standing in the middle of Red Square and defying the combination of President Putin and the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church over Ukraine. You'd be well aware of the consequences, but also it would deeply hurt to feel like you had to do this in the first place and would lead to a break-down in social ties with those around you, and a deep guilt about tearing apart the religious structures you hold most dear. This defiance, should not be under-estimated. I wonder if we would be able or willing to do the same if the need arose?

This defiance has not only caused a stir in Jerusalem, but is also a direct threat to the religious council themselves, since it seems that the apostles are placing the blame for Jesus's death directly at their feet. There's a few points to be made here. One is that this isn't an excuse for anti-Semitism. It's been used as such in history and there are no grounds for it. It isn't anti-Jewish

sentiment, but instead Peter accuses the particular members of the ruling Jewish council of the time for their particular role in sending Jesus to his death.

Secondly, we must appreciate this statement in its religious and legal context – at the time, blood spilled must be atoned for with blood. So the apostles' blaming the Jewish council isn't the same as, for example, some people blaming the government for their handling of Covid. In the legal and religious framework of the time, it carries with it a demand for blood in restitution. This would have seemed to the council members to be a complete incitement to violent revenge.

Thirdly, though, to counteract this, Peter's response recognises their shared religion – 'The God of our ancestors' – there is no anti-Semitism. He also talks of God's action in raising up Jesus as his plan of providing a leader and a saviour to enable forgiveness and repentance. He is not raising a blood debt, but instead, whilst placing the blame on the council, he also places the council's actions in the context of a wider action from God, both to bring forgiveness to the world, but also to offer it to the very people who brought Jesus down. Thus, this isn't Peter inciting violence as a hate crime – it's Peter acknowledging events but showing how even these events bring an offer of forgiveness to those involved.

There is so much more that could be said, but I want to bring this back to the key part of this which I've skipped over so far. Peter's statement that he must obey God rather than human authority. He cannot keep silent because he is a witness to the events along with the Holy Spirit whose power to heal has brought about the confrontation in the first place. How does this kind of statement about obeying God, not humans, relate to us today?

This week we say the Archbishop receiving a lot of attention for his statements at Easter about the government's new immigration processing plans. Now, I don't want to get into the politics of that single issue. I do think that the archbishop is absolutely right to be speaking out on issues of injustice and politics and bringing theological reflection into the public square. No-one can claim any sort of neutrality when discussing political issues. Philosophers have shown that there are no foundationless opinions. Someone who believes that religion should be kept out of the public square holds an opinion and comes at things from their own stance – why should that stance be any more acceptable – it's not neutral, just different. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise. Faith belongs, and has always belonged, firmly in the public square. But even this isn't really what Peter is doing or what I'm talking about today.

Instead, Peter is talking about those times where political authority or cultural pressure effectively ban talk of Jesus, or stop us acting in the way God would have us act. Historically, and in other places, this is a real and legal issue – censorship, banned worship, and so on.

I actually rewrote this part of my sermon because I didn't want to reduce this all to simply a list of times where we are legally or culturally reduced in our ability to speak of Jesus. Witness to Jesus does require wisdom and discernment. And part of that witness might be calling out bad words and practice of others – like saying that we don't agree with the stance of the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church against Ukraine. Part of that witness might be not colluding with bullying or bad practice at work. Part of that witness might be being clear that our riches are for the benefit of others and that a society of greed doesn't apply to us. Part of that witness might end up being the church as a shelter and refuge for refugees and asylum seekers.

We should never go looking for a fight with the establishment, like some crazed anarchic sect, but we should all, always, be alert for what God calls us to do in following Jesus, and if that happens to

go against authority or cultural norm, then it is clear that for Peter, God wins. We can all go home and work out what this means for each of us.

We are witnesses to Jesus. We are witnesses to our faith and the great things God has done. As we said on Palm Sunday, if we are silent, creation will worship God. As we saw on Easter, Mary didn't have all the answers and yet simply testified to what she had seen and the precious little she knew. Today, let nothing and no-one stop us obeying God in how we live, and if called upon, being witnesses to Jesus wherever we are and whatever company we are in. Amen.