
The Apostles Witness

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 6th September

Matthew 10: 16-22 Acts 5:17-29



Let's pray, Living Lord, open your word afresh to us, that we might grow both in understanding, and in obedience, amen.

It's been a month since I was here last time but the passage we just heard follows on from what we looked at last time. That was the rather extraordinary story of Ananias and Sapphira dropping dead on the spot when challenged by Peter for lying to the Holy Spirit.

Last month as that passage was read there was a look of shock on some folks faces as if it was the first time hearing it. I wondered why that was, so when I got home I checked to see if it's in the lectionary. It isn't. I will come back to that later.

Some introductory comments before we dive into this mornings passage. Firstly, when it comes to the spread of Gospel there is a battle going on. In ch 4 the Apostles Peter and John were jailed, tried, threatened by the religious leaders and told to speak no more about Jesus.

They took the issue to church at large, who lifted their voices to God and asked for boldness to speak. Their prayer was answered. Now it's a whole bunch of people the religious leaders are trying to silence.

In ch 5 this time, all the apostles are jailed for the night, interrogated, are again warned not to speak about Jesus. Before they are released they will be flogged.

I only once got the cane at school. I deserved it. I was showing off to my school mates, saying something derogatory about a teacher. Regrettably, they were standing right behind me. I was promptly marched off to the headmasters office.

The headmaster had something of a reputation. Apparently as the result of a good golf swing. I got 3 of the best which left one very accurate finger sized stripe on my butt. It pretty much drew blood and it hurt like heck. I learnt my lesson.

A flogging was up to 39 lashes with a whip across the back and wrapping round the chest. Very rarely people did die from a flogging. Always though it would severely injure you. We will see later how the Apostles respond to being flogged.

Let's unpack a bit of the story. Vs 17 gives us the motivation of the religious authorities actions. Jealousy.

Vs 19-20 as we heard, the Apostles are miraculously freed from jail. They are ordered by an angel to go back to the Temple and tell the people "the whole message about this life." That's another way of saying, "tell the people about the salvation of Christ."

In the morning, the religious leaders send for the prisoners. The guards on duty. The doors are securely locked. But no prisoners. Vs 24 when the captain of the temple and the chief priests hear this, they are perplexed. Especially when they hear that the Apostles are back in the Temple teaching. Vs 26 the Apostles are somewhat carefully removed from the Temple, lest those listening start biffing rocks at the temple police.

In many ways the interrogation and the apostles answers are similar to what happened following Peter and John's imprisonment in ch 4. That said, I want to focus for a bit on the High Priests opening statement. Vs 28. "we gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intended to bring this man's blood on us."

"You intended to bring this man's blood on us." Lets stop here for a moment. The fact is, Jesus blood was on them. When we read of the accounts of Jesus crucifixion, we hear of Pilate trying to have Jesus released.

In the end Pilate symbolically distances himself by washing his hands. Pilate says this. "I am innocent of this man's blood, see to it yourselves." How do the people, including the religious leaders, respond? And all the people answered, "his blood be on us, and on our children."

I have often thought about what the people said that day.

It is both frightening, and glorious.

- It is either the best and the most hopeful thing we could say.
- Or it is the most terrifying, and bleak of things that we could say.

As the crowd screamed, "away with him." "Crucify him." "Let his blood be upon us and our children". They were indeed responsible for Jesus death. But not just them.

The Gospel holds that all humanity is responsible for what happened that day, because all humanity is sinful, and Jesus died to deal with sin. In that sense, Jesus blood being on and on us and our children is indeed a terrifying thought.

Positivity though, "that Jesus blood is on us", points to that which is the means of our salvation. Hebrews tells us that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin." That was foreshadowed in the sacrificial system in the old Testament. It was accomplished through the cross of Christ, in the new Testament.

"you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you intend to bring this man's blood on us." Said the high Priest as he began his interrogation of the Apostles. "His blood be on us and our children." Screamed the crowd that first Good Friday. Again. It is either the best and most hopeful of statements. Or it is the most terrifying and bleak of statements.

The difference between best and hopeful, and terrifying and bleak, is the way that the blood of Christ is upon us. It is either upon us in judgement, or in grace. In judgment, if we stand before God as sinners. In grace, if we stand before God as forgiven and redeemed.

We recall these foundational Gospel truths in our sacraments of Baptism and the Lords Supper. Through Baptism we enter into the community of faith and into the death and the resurrection of Christ. We say in the baptism service. "This is for you, and your children, and all who are far off". Can you hear the echo? "His blood be on us and on our children".

As we join around the Lords Table later in the service, we partake of the body and blood of Christ. It's hard to describe exactly how that happens. except to

say, in a spiritual and mystical sense we are strengthened, and God meets with us in grace.

That his blood is upon us, is either the very best and hopeful of things, or the worst and terrifying of things. Depending that is, on how it is upon us. Either in judgement or in grace.

The good news of the Gospel is that God is always one to offer grace. And I hope every one gathered here this morning can say “Jesus blood is upon me” in that good and hopeful sense.

I lest any think we are too bad or unworthy for God to accept us, through the work and merits of Christ, I want to draw attention to something the Apostles say to the very ones that are persecuting them.

Vs 31, after Peter and the other apostles had again spoken of the Sanhedrin’s complicity in Jesus death, and that God had raised him from the dead. They say this, “God exalted him at his right hand as leader and saviour, that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness for sins”.

This is the first time in Acts where Jesus is called saviour in Acts. Is this because the apostles are offering salvation and grace, even to those who are persecuting them? God exalted him at his right hand as leader and saviour, that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness for sins”.

I’m pretty sure as Peter was speaking he was hoping, and praying, that the hearers would respond positively. That Jesus blood would be upon them. But in a positive sense. “You intend to bring this man’s blood on us”. Absolutely. How did they respond? Vs 33 when they heard this they were enraged and wanted to kill them.

Vs 34 thankfully, a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time.

Gamaliel uses a couple of historical instances where when the leaders of various movements were killed the movements fizzled out. He then says this. Vs 38-39 “so in the present case I tell you keep away from these men and let them alone, because if this plan, or this undertaking, is a human origin it will fail. But if it is God you will not be able to overthrow them. In that case, you may even be found fighting against God.

We might wonder how the religious leaders did not join the dots when the apostles were supernaturally released from prison.

- Or when the man lame from birth was healed in the name of Jesus.
- Or indeed how many such things were now happening in and through the name of the resurrected Jesus.

They were perplexed but not enlightened. Except maybe for Gamaliel. His arguments win over those who wanted to kill the Apostles on the spot. Vs 40 the apostles are brought back in, are flogged, and ordered again not to speak in the name of Jesus.

Vs 41 as they left the council they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to dishonour for the sake of the name.
It would seem God can bring great joy even in such circumstances.

Let's finish by focusing a little on Vs 42 "And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah".

If someone was to ask me to sum up the reason for my faith I think I might well quote a couple of lines from the film "Amazing Grace." It's the part of the movie where William Temple, is now old, blind and nearing the end of his life. Temple, once a slave trader, is now a servant and preacher of the gospel. He says this. "I know two things." "I am a great sinner, and God is a great saviour."

We would probably have as many sentences to sum up our faith as there are ones in church. As different as our sentences might be, there is one thing we all have in common.

We are all called to share what we know of Christ. And for a moment I want to apply that, not in respect to those who have not heard the message, but in respect to each other as believers.

I wrote in the news sheet a month or so ago about a book I was waiting on and have subsequently read. "Let the word dwell richly - the power of the one another word." There is a bit more in my news sheet reflection today.

The point of the book is that great growth and maturity would happen if believers spoke the Word regularly to one another. Words of encouragement. Words of exhortation. Words of Gospel truth. That we speak the Truth in love to each other as believers is a key part of growing into the fulness of Christ. Eph 4:15 but speaking the truth and love we must grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ.

But to speak the truth we need to know the truth. Back to my earlier comment about parts of the lectionary that are missing.

To have the word dwell richly within us, and be able to speak the truth in love, we need to hear and know the word. That is not helped if there are significant portions of scripture we have never heard.

Further, and this is where it gets really radical as far as our general church practice. If it's only ever the preacher speaking and the people listening, the body is not being equipped, and it is not growing to the fullness of Christ.

“but speaking the truth and love we must grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ.” Understand this. The “we” who are speaking are the “we” who are growing. Or to say it another way. If we are not able to speak the truth, we will not grow to the level we could grow should we speak God truth one to another.

Yes, there are those who are recognised by the church, and set aside to publicly proclaim and preach the word. But they have no more authority than any Christian when it comes to speaking the truth in love to one another.

That means any believer in church this morning has the same authority to speak God's Word of Truth into my life as I have it to speak into yours. Imagine if when we met together we had high on our agenda that we each be the means of encouraging and building each other up as we rightly apply God's word into each others lives.

Of course that is going to grow us and make us reliant on God's word and Gods Holy Spirit. And that's the point. One thing is clear from the Apostles' behaviour in our passage. Nothing was going to stop them speaking about Jesus. Nothing was going to stop them from proclaiming the gospel.

There was, and there is, no better way to grow a church than the Truth being heard, and yes of course the truth being lived in the lives of the speakers.

The challenge for us as Anglicans is to have the courage to speak. We are generally pretty good at being nice and loving people. We are a bit less confident in realising any of us can speak God's truth to another for their upbuilding and edification.

40 years ago a man named Harry Thomson spoke the truth in love into my life following a service. He discerned my hunger and passion to hear the word proclaimed from the pulpit. Harry saw me perched on the front pew, bible in hand, looking and listening intently. He came up to me and said “young man you need to start taking notes”. That was God's word of exhortation to me. It was the beginning of a journey that lead me into ministry.

I have a leather bound set of 1842 Matthew Henry commentaries on my shelf. I restored them for Harry and in 1987 when Harry went to be with the Lord his widow Ellen gifted the commentaries to me.

This morning I opened one and re read the letter Ellen wrote me as she gifted me the commentaries. I share one comment. “dear Harry is now seeing him face to face. Let us press on in our own race” Ellen, now herself with the Lord, spoke the truth in love to me this very morning 40 years later.

“Let us press on with our own race.”

My friends, there are people living and dying without Christ. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, more important in the world than doing everything, and anything, we can to make sure that that does not happen.

Let’s pray. Lord Jesus may your word dwell richly within us, so much so that it flows out to the engorgement and growth of those around us, the saved, and that those who do not yet know you will come to faith in the Lord Jesus, amen.