

Sunday 25th February 2024 - Sunday Service

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Date: 25 February 2024

Preacher: Richard Honeysett

[0 : 00] Good morning. Again. I don't know if you've heard of Open Doors.! It's a church missions organisation for the persecuted church.

! And every year it publishes what it calls a world watch list.! And its most recent report shows that an estimated 365 million Christians worldwide – apparently that's one in seven – face high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. Last year, 5,000 Christians paid for their faith with their lives. And also last year, there were seven times more attacks on churches, Christian schools and hospitals than the year before. I don't know how you respond when you hear those kind of stats. I guess we're saddened. It might serve as a prompt for us to pray for our brothers and sisters around the world that are facing this kind of hostility. But I guess it's also quite hard for us to relate to that sort of information. We can meet freely like this, we can pray, we can worship, we can learn together from God's word. And we've been able to do that for many years, thankfully. But perhaps we do face a more subtle form of persecution, perhaps more of a pressure rather than persecution that kind of stops us speaking out in the way that we would want to. I think if we did a show of hands this morning about one of the biggest challenges of living the Christian life, I'm confident in predicting that for many of us, it would be speaking out about our faith in a neighbourhood, in a country that on the surface, at least, doesn't want to know Jesus. So far in the book of Acts, in the chapters we've looked at, it's been a really exciting start to the creation of the early church. If you remember, the Holy

Spirit falls on the church in a really dramatic way. 3,000 were converted after Peter's first sermon and the church are forming this beautifully cohesive community. Most recently, Peter and John have healed a well-known layman and there is awe and amazement amongst the people. Peter preaches again and then opposition forms and in chapter 4, the first barrier is placed in front of the early church.

So, Lou's going to come and read it for us. So, if you've got a church Bible there, it's page 1095. So, Acts chapter 4, verses 1 to 31.

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people.

[3 : 21] They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, put them in jail until the next day.

But many who heard the message believed, so the number of men who believed grew to about 5,000. The next day, the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem.

Annas, the high priest, was there and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them.

By what power or what name did you do this? Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, Rulers and elders of the people, Jesus is the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

[4 : 53] When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together.

What are we going to do with these men? They asked. Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign and we cannot deny it.

But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name. Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

But Peter and John replied, What is right in God's eyes, to listen to you or to him? You be the judges. As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.

[5 : 57] After further threats, they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them because all the people were praising God for what had happened.

For the man who was miraculously healed was over 40 years old. On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. Sovereign Lord, they said, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David. Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in the city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

[7 : 01] They did what your power and will have decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Thanks, Lou. I don't think it's really a surprise that opposition forms. And I don't think it would have been really a surprise for the disciples either.

If you remember, shortly before Jesus was arrested, he describes the future to them without him. And he says, in this world, you will have trouble.

But take heart, I've overcome the world. The pattern for them, for us, is one of trouble. And I think the gospel is probably as offensive today as it was back then in that time for Peter and John.

[8 : 17] But I think it's the response to the opposition that is quite interesting to hear and can speak into the situations that we find ourselves in, maybe at work or in our communities. We're going to look at the nature of the opposition, what it kind of looks like, the response to the opposition, and then a transformation against the opposition.

So firstly, the nature of the opposition. I think we need to imagine the scene. Remember last week, we heard that a lame man known to many who would have been attending the temple is instantly healed in the name of Jesus.

And he's led through the gates into the temple courts by Peter and John. And there is a sense of astonishment at this miracle. This man's been lame from birth and was a regular at those gates. People would have passed him by pretty much every day. And now he's not begging at them, but he's leaping through them, praising God.

And people flocked through the gates following to Solomon's Colonnade, an area in the sort of outside part of the outer courts of the temple.

[9 : 32] And therefore, it's no surprise that the powers that be wanted to at least know what was going on. And so they approach and they listen in. And what they hear is that they were directly involved in the death of Jesus, that Jesus is now risen, that he's the promised Messiah, and that through him all people, not just Jews, all people will be blessed.

For them, it's time to step in. It says in our chapter, chapter 4, verse 2, that they are greatly disturbed. Do you see that right at the start? What they see are unschooled men teaching.

They're unauthorized preachers. They're unprofessional speakers. And I think more than that, the content of Peter's preaching is highly offensive.

For among these kind of heavies, including the captain of the temple guard that have come to arrest Peter and John, are the Sadducees. And these are the upper class, wealthy men who made up the Jewish aristocracy.

Unlike the Pharisees, they didn't believe in the resurrection. So to hear that Jesus is the risen Messiah makes them angry. But also, I think, the Sadducees worked very closely with the Roman authorities, mainly to kind of keep their money and their power.

[11 : 00] So this is not only a threat to the spiritual status quo, but also the political kind of status quo, too. So Peter and John are interrupted before they finish their message, and they're put in jail overnight.

And the next day, the whole Sanhedrin are assembled, and that's a group of rulers and elders, think about 71 of them, that gather, and Peter and John are brought in before them.

It's a very intimidating scene, but it's not an unfamiliar one. So those names that Lee read ring a bell. Annas, Caiaphas, just a number of weeks previous to this, Jesus had been standing in this very position, in front of the same group of men.

And there's strong evidence from John's Gospel that while Peter waited outside, John went in with Jesus, so knew the arena all too well. So what does the opposition amount to?

Well, it starts with a question. By what power or what name did you do this? I think it's a slightly ironic question, actually. These leaders are gathered to interrogate Peter and John, and they're the leaders of God's people, and yet they appear completely oblivious to what God is doing through the power of the Holy Spirit around them.

[12 : 24] And then other than that, the nature of their opposition seems to have absolutely no substance in the face of the evidence.

It's actually really irrational. They're amazed by the confidence of Peter and John, verse 13. They know that these men have spent time with Jesus. They can see the healed man with their own eyes, verse 14.

And then later on, verse 21, they see hundreds of people praising God. So they've got nothing to say. They panic.

They suspend the court. And then behind closed doors, they say, what do we do? We can't deny what they've done. Okay, says someone. I've got an idea.

Let's just stop them speaking. And that's what they did. Verse 18, it says, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

[13 : 24] And then they issue threats. Let them go. And there's the first opposition in Acts. I don't think it's a spoiler to say that this is just a taste of what's to come, but it's a starting point.

Persecution is a theme throughout the remainder of Luke's account of the early church. But I think this little taste of opposition helps us understand the pressures that we can face as well.

All these years later, the aim of the Sanhedrin was to silence Peter and John, to stop this thing from spreading. Because what they were preaching was a threat to the order of things, religiously and politically.

And today, whilst some of the results, if you like, of being a Christian are encouraged, so the good works, the charitable donations, the root motivation for those good works, the gospel of Jesus, needs to be silenced.

As one writer puts it, that the world will tolerate the church only when it's the type of church it finds tolerable. I think it's also a public-private thing.

[14 : 39] Would Peter and John have been hauled before the authorities if the work of the early church had taken place entirely in people's homes? Maybe, but it might have taken a lot more time.

I think it's Christianity out there in the marketplace that is the problem. The location of this healing and the subsequent explanation couldn't be more of a challenge to the thinking of the day.

And likewise for us, if we want to speak of Christ in a political arena or even in our workplace, it's just kind of met with a desire to just gently, quietly silence our voice.

But I think on a kind of more personal note, I think the impact of somebody putting their trust in Jesus is huge. And it can be unsettling for those that see it.

This event unsettled some who saw it. When someone decides to follow Christ, at that moment their identity is transformed, their worldview is changed.

[15 : 42] They're staking their life on the death and the resurrection of Jesus. And it gives them new priorities that leads to them wanting to live and serve for Jesus.

And I think this can have a big impact on those around them that naturally can oppose that sort of change. If you've got Christian parents, you probably didn't have to deal with opposition when you became a Christian.

But I know for many of you here today that that was, and perhaps still, is a daily opposition. I think as we pray for the persecuted church, let's not forget to pray for those closer to home who kind of experience a daily opposition from those that they love, perhaps within their families for following Christ.

So the opposition wishes to silence Peter and John, but how do they respond? I think the first thing to say is that they could have kept quiet. This could have been the end of the spread of the gospel. It was a potential turning point. But fueled by the Holy Spirit, they respond with conviction and clarity. And they keep Jesus at the center of their defense.

[16:58] Yeah, they keep Jesus at the center of their defense. Look at verse 9. If we're being called today to account for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are asked how he was healed, then know this.

You and all the people of Israel, it's by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

Jesus is the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. You see, Peter's first response moves from one man's physical healing as a picture, a sign of what God can do at a far deeper level for the crowd, for the Sanhedrin, for all.

It's a picture that points to the salvation that is offered to all, but through Christ alone. And this is a bold and a brave claim.

[18:07] It's a tough blow to absorb for the Sanhedrin, because this statement, if you think about it, suggests four things. Salvation is available.

Salvation is a necessity. Salvation is attainable through Jesus. And salvation is not available anywhere else.

And this, of course, leads to claims that Christianity is just too exclusive. You can't make that sort of statement today.

After all, you know, we live in a pluralistic society where there's no place for such kind of blinkered and narrow-minded claims. You can believe Jesus if you want to, but don't elevate him above other religious leaders or world views.

Jesus is just one of many routes to fulfillment. But I think it's quite interesting that the church was born and grew in an equally pluralistic society.

[19:14] Roman society embraced a whole range of gods. Its roots were in Greek philosophy. And other mystical religions also sprang up.

We'll see some of this later in the book of Acts when Paul starts his travels. And the Romans, in effect, said it is fine to worship those gods as long as you also worship the emperor.

You can't claim that your God is supreme. So Peter's words here in verse 12 are divisive. They were divisive then. They're divisive today. But look at the impact of them.

If you remember, at the end of chapter 2, we're told that 3,000 people believed the gospel after Peter's first sermon. In this extract, it's risen to 5,000.

And I think it just says it's the men. No mention of women or children there. So what is it about this kind of exclusive message that brought about such a change? And what is it about this exclusive message that has seen a huge growth in numbers of people choosing to follow Christ, particularly in many southern hemisphere countries in the last few years?

[20:26] Well, I think it's the testimony of one of my friends, actually, which always kind of inspires me to answer this question. He was brought up in a family that had literally zero church background, no interest in religion really at all.

He's one of those nerdy academic types. And he went off to university, got into discussions about the meaning of life, as you do. And he set off on this pursuit of truth. And for him, it was mainly conducted through reading.

He's a very kind of logical type. So he just studied every world religion systematically and drew some conclusions. Knowing him, he probably created a spreadsheet or something as well.

But this is what he found. This is a sort of summary of what he found, really. Number one, he found that all religions contain much wisdom. There's very little that separates Christianity on that front.

Buddha, Muhammad, showed much wisdom in their teachings, as did Jesus. Number two, that most religions acknowledge sin or at least some sense of morality or immorality.

[21 : 29] Number three, he found that most religions, at the heart of them, if you look carefully, and it's expressed in different forms, but at the heart of them is the idea of self. So most religions promote the idea of, I think to quote Buddha, striving without ceasing.

The art of self-salvation, proving yourself, looking inward to reach a certain level or a certain standard of morality. And number four, he found that Jesus operates on a level that no other religious leader even attempts to, that of saviour.

And for my friend, this was a massive breakthrough. No amount of human effort would guarantee the end goal, a right relationship with the creator of the universe.

But here was Jesus claiming to be a unique saviour, and it led him to read the Bible for the first time. And what he found, that while on the surface, a claim like this line today might seem to be an exclusive statement, what he actually found is that Christianity in its nature couldn't be more inclusive.

because what Jesus offers is an offer to all. And I think to see this, we need to look really no further than the man that Jesus, that Peter and John heal.

[22 : 57] Who is he? He's a beggar. He's disabled. Many just passed him by every day for years. And yet his, you know, so-called lowly life was transformed by the power of Jesus' salvation.

And if you read the Gospels, it provides examples of men and women from all walks of life, all being offered salvation through the name of Jesus alone.

No one's barred, only those wanting to save themselves. Jesus proves himself to be far from exclusive. But I think also to see Peter's claims that there's no other way, we have to take ourselves to the cross.

If there was another way, why would Jesus go to the cross? Why would he suffer the brutality, the isolation, the abuse, and take the wrath of God that was stored up for all people to the extent that it sent darkness on the earth for three hours?

Do you remember Jesus' words just before? Father, Father, if you were willing, take this cup from me, take this judgment from me. He knows the horrors to come and then says, yet not my will, but yours be done.

[24 : 18] I think Jesus' death was so costly and groundbreaking. Surely, this couldn't be to put himself on a list of options from which to choose.

salvation is found in no one else for there's no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. But I think Peter's second claim, after he and John are called back in, I think it's just as powerful in its simplicity.

Look at verse 20. It says, as for us, we cannot help speaking about what we've seen and heard.

Another unique feature of the Christian faith is its reliance on events.

And Peter and John, God's spokesmen at this time, can testify to these events. With other religions, it's the teachings that save you. It's the philosophy.

With Christianity, it's the events. The incarnation. We saw God become man, born as a baby. We saw him cry. We saw him bleed. The crucifixion.

[25 : 26] We saw him go to the cross. We saw him take the punishment for our wrongdoing. And then we saw him cry out, it is finished. There's no more striving.

And then we saw him following his resurrection, talking with individuals and with big groups. A living saviour giving us an eternal reality.

The events save us. The gospel is an announcement of good news, of something that's been done for you in history. As Peter says, it's what we've seen and heard.

And as a result, Peter and John cannot help, it says, speaking of the power of salvation in Jesus' name. That's a really great phrase, isn't it? It's like they have no choice. Another translation I saw puts it, we don't have the power to not speak.

They're kind of compelled to tell their story as eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus. So how do we respond to this kind of dramatic account?

[26 : 32] I don't really see myself in this story. Do you? I've not faced opposition like this. I've not shown this level of courage for the gospel, that's for sure. But I'm not sure we're supposed to put ourselves in this story.

These were unique events that God used to grow the early church at a unique point in its history. However, I think many Christians are drawn to the character of Peter.

It might be his impulsive character that kind of you can relate to. But more likely, it's his fear and maybe even his betrayal that resonate with us when he denies knowing Jesus shortly before Jesus goes to the cross.

And I think if we track Peter's transformation from coward to sort of fearless evangelist, I think we can take great encouragement as we seek to share our faith with those we know.

back at Jesus' trial, Peter, he's alone, he's doubting, he denies. But Jesus gets alongside him, doesn't he?

[27 : 46] And in love, he restores Peter. He draws him alongside him and says, you know, take care of my sheep. And Peter sets out on that calling to be the rock on whom Jesus builds his church.

But Peter in himself, he can't declare the gospel of Jesus. He can't heal the beggar. The Holy Spirit is at work here.

The beginning of verse 8, it says, then Peter filled with the Holy Spirit. These are the words of Peter, but they're inspired by the Spirit.

And the Holy Spirit lives in each of us that followed Christ. Christ. Maybe our fear at speaking out sometimes is because we look at ourselves, we look at our fear and the reason for it rather than to the Spirit for help.

How often do we, or I, pray in the morning first thing, Lord, fill me with your Spirit so I might be empowered to speak to so-and-so today about my faith.

[29 : 01] I think secondly, we can be fearful about speaking about Jesus because we worry about what to say. You know, I can't quote the right verses. I'm hopeless when they start talking about science and Christianity.

But Peter's simplicity here is really helpful. We cannot help speaking about what we've seen and heard. And I think later in one of his letters he says, you know, always be prepared as you need to to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

In my work I get to see lots of trainee teachers teaching lots of lessons. Sometimes I have to observe like a GCSE computer science class or something or worse still an A-level physics lesson. It's like it's just not my area of expertise. And yet for some strange reason I'm trusted to make a judgment on the quality of learning. And this can be quite tricky when, you know, of all the human beings in the room I just know the least.

And yet I can normally offer feedback because of what I see and hear. Every one of us in this room who follows Christ has a unique incredible miraculous story to tell of God's goodness to you in his offer of salvation through Christ.

[30 : 29] What we've seen and what we've heard in our lives is a most powerful way of communicating the gospel of Jesus. Jesus. And then finally Peter and John they weren't alone.

We were saying yesterday at the breakfast yesterday morning that sharing the gospel is not a solo sport. And we haven't got time to look at the last verses in this chapter but there are some powerful prayers going on in the background particularly when Peter and John go back to the other Christians.

And the prayer in verses 24 to 30 is a brilliant prayer declaring God's sovereignty really that he speaks into the world in this case through David that he has power and control in every situation including the death of Jesus.

And then they pray for boldness to go out there again and share the gospel. Is that a description of a community group? Maybe.

Certainly it's church in its early stages isn't it? These Christians come together they connect they pray for each other they encourage each other. Maybe we could use our community groups in a similar way.

[31 : 46] To know that you're being prayed for as you have an opportunity to speak of your story that is a glorious kingdom prayer. There is opposition across the world to Jesus and the report from Open Doors that I was quoting from earlier makes pretty difficult reading.

But alongside the persecution of the church often comes this incredible growth in people turning to Christ.

And Acts chapter 4 shows us that. And many countries across the world are following in a similar pattern today. The church is continuing to grow and grow and we get to be a part of it.

Thank you.