

7 April 2013: John 20:19-end and Acts 5: 27-32

I've booked a flight with Ryanair and my luggage allowance is so small, pretty much whatever clothes I can pile on and still manage to bend my knees and elbows along with whatever I can cram into a tiny bag. So, in an effort to reduce the bulk I've bought a Kindle – an e-reader. No more weighing up this book against that, I can have as many as I want! But there's a downside – I've become addicted to downloading samples of books. No longer do I have to stand in a bookshop, scanning the shelves and then leafing through a likely candidate trying to decide if this book or that might hold my attention – no, I can have the first few chapters for free. It's meant to whet my appetite and buy the rest.

Today's reading from Acts is a bit of a sample, but one which starts part way through the story. It needs context to make it come alive. It starts; 'when they had brought them, they had them stand before the council'. Well, that's two groups of unidentified 'they'. Who went and found who and why? Not quite a whodunit.....

The place is Jerusalem, the time is in the early days of the new 'Life' following Jesus' resurrection, the players are Peter and John and the Temple security. Peter and John and the apostles have been teaching that Jesus had risen from the dead and was the person spoken of in Scripture as the Messiah. They have been arrested for healing a lame man and when released had been ordered not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. And they disobey the order. They carry on meeting in the Temple area, at a place called Solomon's Porch and people flock to listen to them. Such is the power of the Holy Spirit that the sick are healed as they walk by – we are told that the sick are carried out into the streets, laid on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on them as he came by. People from the surrounding towns came into Jerusalem – and they were all cured. The place where they meet is somewhere like a renowned venue – Tom Wright suggests the Royal Albert Hall - where all the most important international stars will play; where concert goers will pay top prices for the best seats, or queue for standing room only. And they are like a small scruffy group of unknown musicians. They start to play just outside one of the main entrances, playing a strange mixture of old classical music and rowdy new songs. At first the management of the venue think, well this sort of thing comes and goes, people will lose interest in it, even if attracts any attention at all. And then it is attracting an audience, people who come especially to hear this new group, rather than going inside to hear the established programmes. And then newspaper articles begin to be written. Maybe the manager thinks it's time to get an injunction, a court order, to move them on.

Peter and John are attracting attention. They are pointing out that Jesus is the Messiah that, as Thomas exclaimed in our gospel reading, he is God. That Jesus' resurrection confirmed all that Jesus had said about himself. That he really was from God. That he did speak and act with the absolute authority that came only from God. That the resurrection didn't make Jesus something that he was not before. Rather, it makes public something that those closest to him had begun to realise before his death. This attention is worrying the managers of the Temple – the High Priests and the Council. Peter and John were in breach of the order demanding that they keep silent and stop healing. So they, and other apostles, were put in prison. Imagine, locked up yet again, the apostles weren't protesting against an injustice, it was more that they simply couldn't keep silent. The power of the living God was so real, so concrete, so undeniable that they had to speak. It was God who was healing people, not the apostles – they were just the conduit. And they were getting arrested for it.

Our sample begins at the point where, they had been released from prison rather unexpectedly by an angel of God who had commanded them to go to the Temple and carry on teaching.

The first 'they' of our reading is the commander of the Temple security who had gone to find them. The second, 'they' are Peter, John and the apostles. The High Priest is angry – why did you disobey? he asks. Peter responds to the effect that he cannot be disobedient to God. In this short passage, Peter says that God, the same God of the Jewish people – of Abraham, Moses and Elijah, has raised Jesus from the dead. The words 'killed by hanging on a tree' echo words in the Old Testament where this form of execution means that the person is cursed by God – and yet Peter says that God has raised Jesus to sit at his right

hand. He is saying, as Thomas said, that Jesus is God. John wrote his gospel that we might come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Peter cannot keep this truth to himself, he cannot keep silent. He is obeying God in speaking of it. The early church didn't repeat the words of Jesus, instead they talked **about** Jesus. They wanted those around them to know about Jesus and to come to believe.

Of course we also know that they lived in a way that was different too. How we present ourselves in the world is important; I've recently been struck by a description, to avoid 'slipping into easy-going paganism with a Christian veneer' instead of living as a family with those who share your belief in Jesus. Something for me to ponder as I reflect each day on how I have lived and how others will have perceived me.

And how should I speak of my belief? Our lifestyle can only go so far, experience can only account for so much. There will come a point at which we will have to speak. Those in house groups last year explored this, using John Pritchard's book – How to explain your faith. If you haven't read it, I recommend you borrow a copy and speak to house group members. I've heard from at least one person of the opportunities that have come their way that they now see and take advantage of. And often there's little speaking involved, often it involves listening to another person trying to work out why they are drawn to something they don't understand. John Pritchard describes the way that the Jesus of the gospels can't quite be categorised. 'Prophet? Yes – and no. Teacher? Yes – and more. Revolutionary? No and, yes in a way. A dynamic leader and yet a servant too. Humble, certainly – but also strangely powerful. Clear and transparent – but also deeply mysterious. Friend to everyone – but somehow 'Lord' as well.' Who is Jesus to you? Does that change? Does Jesus meet you at your place of need? And is that different today from it how it has been in the past?

At the 9.45 service we will sing 'now he bids us tell abroad, how the lost may be restored, how the penitent forgiven....' Telling is at the heart of our faith along with living it out.

I was on a work related course recently, the first part of which had been a year ago, the small group had shared quite a lot about ourselves and I was known to be a licensed lay minister. We had various exercises to do and the only way I could explain my response to one of them was to refer to a passage from Philippians. Now I could have simply said it is good to think about good things. But that was not just a bit of a cop out, it simply couldn't do justice to what I actually wanted to say. Which was: that it makes a difference to me if I can remind myself to rejoice in the Lord always. Not to worry about things but to pray and let my requests be known to God. And above all to think on whatever is true, honourable, pure, commendable etc.'. I didn't say it to browbeat those in the group, but to better explain what makes me tick; in much the same way that others were saying that protecting and providing for their family was their motivation for their actions. You will find your own ways and your own words.

So, living and telling were hallmarks of the apostles. So was healing. And that too is a mark of Jesus' ministry on earth today too. I mentioned – does Jesus meet you at your place of need? He will if we ask. Are you anxious, fearful or know sorrow? Do you want courage, joy or peace? What Ian Bailey often refers to as being 'dis-eased'. We can ask Jesus. And we don't have to struggle with that on our own. While it might not have the same dramatic impact that the healings by Peter and John had, we have a small group of people who will pray with you. Offering a short prayer that Jesus will heal you, will make you whole. This is available this morning, after communion. Psalm 118, which the choir will sing later, ends 'O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever'. Jesus' love extends to all of us, and he wants us to be whole. Amen.

Sarah Thomas 7 April 2013