

Acts 4:1-31- Astonishing Faith

Good morning everyone, its really great to be with you this morning, if you don't know me my name is Tom, I am one of the student ministers here at Church at the Peak. I'm usually out with the Jnr high guys doing Bible study at this time so I'm really excited to be in Church with you today. I'm also an England rugby union fan so I was up early this morning watching our demolition of Scotland but I've had a coffee so I'm alright and awake and ready to go. We are continuing our series in the Book of Acts, the book which records the happenings of the early church after Jesus has ascended to heaven and this week we are looking at the first persecution to hit the church.

How about I start by praying for us?

Persecution Begins

The passage opens with a clear contrast of the effect that the message that Peter and John proclaimed had and it is meant to be stark for us. Two extremes, one group and awesomely in this case the larger group respond in repentance and faith. Unfortunately not all respond this way. Its at this point in Acts that we see the persecution that Jesus faced in the Gospels come for the Church that is proclaiming his name. The leaders of the Jews, those who should have recognised Jesus from scripture as soon as he rocked up, the ones who rejected him and schemed to have him executed. They arrest Peter and John and throw them in gaol over night. The mass conversions, the commotion at the temple has been noticed and the Jewish leaders have acted to put it down.

For the first time we see Jesus promise that they will face hatred because of him come to fruition, the men are arrested and I'm sure they had a few thoughts going through their heads as they sat in prison that night. Thoughts of humiliation, of torture, of crucifixion that may await them the next day. The fear they must have been feeling. Doubt they got much sleep that night.

Spirit in the driver's seat

So Peter and John are dragged before the council of Jewish leaders to answer for their crimes. Standing before the leaders they are asked a leading question aimed at confirming the blasphemy that they have been preaching, to give them a reason to execute them publicly and to stamp out this Christian Church. There is a moment in the gospels that comes to mind at this moment, and I cant help but wonder if Peter and John had this in mind at this moment.

In Luke 21:12-19 talking about the future kingdom Jesus says this to his disciples:

¹²“But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. ¹³And so you will bear testimony to me. ¹⁴But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. ¹⁵For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. ¹⁶You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷Everyone will

hate you because of me. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ Stand firm, and you will win life.

Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit (vs 8) responds to this Jewish council with the sermon that he has been preaching over and over again in Acts, no no its not about us, its about Jesus, We did this by the name of Jesus, who you crucified, but whom God raised. I mean the council must have been stunned. In this moment Peter and John were being faced with the potential of an excruciating death and how do they respond to the accusation? ¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

I'm sure in many ways Peter was stunned at what he was saying. In that moment of fear, a moment much more scary than the time he denied Jesus to a little girl, he preaches the gospel unashamedly. The spirit filled him, he must have felt like a passenger as the truth poured out of him by the spirit which is clearly in the driving seat at this point. A courage so profound it left the council astonished at their faith. Jesus isn't their but his work is continuing, his challenging of their authority is continuing by his spirit through his people (vs 14).

And how can the Jewish leaders respond. Exactly how Jesus predicted. They had nothing. This crippled man had been healed, and he had been healed in the name of Jesus. Peter's explanation was water tight, they had no response. So their response is kinda weird, they tell them look we will let you go but you need to stop teaching this stuff, Peter and John say, yeah nah we wont stop, we will continue to teach what we have seen, and then they let them go anyway because they have no real response.

Praise the Lord

They return to their community and this is my favourite part of this passage. ²⁴ When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.

The response of the community to this news is to immediately start to praise God for what he has done. There is no party for Peter and John they don't get a single mention from this point onwards. They praise God that he would do this work in the spirit that there is nothing the opposition to the Gospel can do, not because it is cleverly presented in confident and well constructed arguments, but because it is simply the truth.

And then what do they do? They pray that this will continue, they are bold hoping that the spirit will continue this work, they don't just celebrate the past they look to the future and plan to act to continue this work knowing that they will face further persecution which we will read about over the next few weeks. And in true Acts style, they get a response, the room shakes and they are filled with the Holy Spirit and they what? They spoke the Word of God boldly. Knowing that this would result in further persecution but they knew this was a good thing, that Jesus said they will be hated because of him and that meant they were truly following him.

Application

There are like 500 things I want to say about this passage but I am going to restrict myself.

Astonishing faith

¹³When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

They were astonished. That these men could stand before them and declare to aggressively that they had sinned and killed Jesus but that God had raised him to life and that they needed to put their faith in him. How do people respond to your faith? Are they astonished? Or are they underwhelmed and so easily brush it off? Do people even know that you go to church on a Sunday?

You would be surprised the effect that boldness has on people and I think this is even more the case now in our culture, where spend so much time doing this (looking at phone) and no time in conversation. At Growth Group this week we spoke about how strange it is to talk to someone on the train let alone evangelise, and in the workplace we want be polite and not upset anyone. But what are you worried about? Reputation, awkwardness? What's Peter and John worried about? Their lives? Or the salvation that comes through the name of Jesus? And the fact that the most important thing the people before them need to hear is the gospel. I know its a lot easier said than done but it's the truth of what they do in this passage.

They have this faith that astonishes not because of anything they have done but because of the spirit that dwells in them, the same spirit that dwells in you if you call Jesus King. Literally the same spirit and that spirit is able to do incredible things through you should you trust him. He has it covered.

That when you speak to your workmates about Jesus it's the spirit working through you, God's breath our lungs, you don't need any special education, if you know the gospel you can evangelise and you can evangelise boldly as people see what is important to you, what you will risk your reputation for, what you spend your time doing. Any follower of Jesus is capable of being astonishing as they are used by the spirit to proclaim the truth just as Peter did. But the first step is starting that conversation, initiating. People need to know this truth the Pharisees and Sadducees needed to know this truth, Peter the fisherman needed to know this truth, the CEO of Qantas needs to know this truth, and the beggar outside the trains station at Redfern needs to know this truth, because there is no other name.

Prayerful community

When Peter and John get back to their friends and family I mentioned before that as a community they respond to the great and the scary things that have occurred with prayer. They are a community of believers that not only trust in the spirit for the proclamation of truth but who turn to God and praise him for all he does. They leave no glory with men, they know there is nothing they can do on their own and so they praise God and they pray that he will continue his good work in them, prayer is right at the centre of the mission.

Prayer is so important because it is us demonstrating a reliance on God rather than trusting in ourselves. Can you imagine what it would be like here if as a church we were like that. Committing every single good thing, every single struggle, every single task, to God in

prayer. I don't mean just like in the formal part of the service, but at morning tea, ending our conversations with prayer for each other and the things discussed. In general conversation with people, stopping and going, hey, how about we pray for that? Stopping part way through your growth group and just going, lets pray and thank God for that. When something awesome happens to someone do we get carried away will the well done's and forget about the, praise Gods?

Being a prayerful community is important. Because prayerful communities respond to persecution with fearless prayer. Persecution ignites the Gospel in Acts 4 and the community of believers respond asking for more. Nothing can stand in the way of the truth and they know this, we know this, and so we can pray and have courage. Because they know they have fully rely on God for it. In our vision to see the people of Peakhurst and beyond transformed by the love of Jesus we need to pray, because it shows who we rely on to get the job done.

People will respond – one way or another

One way or another, people respond to the news of Jesus. We see this in the life of Jesus and we have seen it in Acts up until this point. At the start of the passage we have a clear contrast of two responses, one group, the 5000 people, which is most likely only talking about the men, let alone their wives and children, turn repent and believe becoming one with Christ and joining the community of believers. As we consider how to be more effective in sharing the Gospel in our Growth Groups, as we work on our testimonies and soon we will be thinking about how to present the Gospel to people we should be encouraged so see that through the spirit God uses those explanations to save people, that people do respond to the Gospel. We have seen it in Acts over and over again and so you can be sure that when you evangelise, when you share your testimony and the Gospel with people they may well turn to Christ in response, I mean we are all hear aren't we? Its not about us, its about Jesus.

But then we have the other group, those who think they are to clever for Jesus, those who think they have nothing to learn from uneducated fisherman Peter. Or that they have too much to hold onto personally, their religious position, the wealth that comes from that. How can they be expected to abandon what they have and join a community of tradesman. Don't you find it strange that the men doing the really awesome work here aren't the people we would expect because in our society we have so much value of intellectual superiority and economic wealth that we are too prideful to accept the truth. These are the true men and women of God, who would stand before a council and proclaim the truth with no regard for their own safety for the sake of trying to help those who think they are better. Peter pleads that they would see that they should turn from their sins and follow Christ but these men respond to the gospel with distain because it threatens the God's they already have in their lives, wealth, power, security. And my question is, is that you? Do you see this message and reject it because it threatens to change the things in your life that you have already made into God's? I can but echo the sentiment of Peter. Salvation is found in no other name but Jesus. Nothing else offers you new life, nothing else offers you a reprieve from death. Nothing. Because its not about you, its about Jesus.

Conclusion

The spirit is moving the mission forward. The church and more specifically Peter and John have survived this first persecution but only because the spirit worked through Peter in this profound way. Showing us that we can trust God that his spirit will work through us and so can be bold. Because in this moment it is God who does the great work, not Peter or John, but God alone. I thought I would end with a quote from potentially the greatest preacher who ever lived, the late Billy Graham. "I am not going to heaven because I have preached to great crowds and seen thousands of converts. I am going to heaven just like the thief on the cross who said in that last moment 'Lord, remember me'". No matter the quality of the preacher vs 12¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

And so we must follow Jesus, and make sure everyone knows about it.

Let me pray for us.