

Sunday 25th April – Fourth Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Christine Eaton

As we follow the disciples on their journey after the resurrection of Jesus, our reading this week places them firmly in the path of conflict. Peter and John had just healed a man at the Beautiful Gate to the Temple, but making quite sure that everyone knew he was healed in the name of the risen and resurrected Christ.

Amongst the crowd who had just witnessed this, were the leading priests and religious leaders of the day, who were not impressed and were very angry with the disciples for what they would have considered claims, that were quite improper and out of line with Jewish beliefs.

These leading priests had special influence and were even close relatives of the high priest. The captain of the temple guard was the leader of the guards who were stationed around the temple, to ensure order. The Sadducees were members of a small, but powerful Jewish religious sect that did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. They were religious leaders who stood to gain financially by co-operating with the Romans. Most of the people who engineered and carried out Jesus' arrest, were from these three groups.

Peter and John spoke to the people during the afternoon prayer time and the Sadducees moved in quickly to investigate. Because they did not believe in the resurrection, they were understandably disturbed by what Peter and John were saying. Peter and John were clearly going against one of their fundamental beliefs and were threatening their authority as religious leaders. Even though the nation was under Roman rule, the Sadducees had almost unlimited power over the temple grounds. Which is why they were able to arrest Peter and John for teaching something which contradicted their beliefs.

The rulers, elders and teachers of religious law made up the Jewish high council, the same council that had condemned Jesus to death. It had 70 members plus the current high priest, who presided over the group. The Sadducees held the majority in the ruling group, all the wealthy, powerful and intellectual men of Jerusalem. Jesus' followers stood before the high council, just as he had. Some of them had played significant roles in Jesus' trial and they were not happy that the man they thought they had sacrificed for the good of the nation had followers who were just as persistent and promised to be just as troublesome as he was.

So they asked Peter and John by what power they had healed the man and by whose authority were they preaching the words they were saying about Jesus.

These religious leaders felt threatened by them and what they were saying and were more interested in maintaining their reputations and positions, than pleasing God. Through the help of the Holy Spirit Peter spoke boldly to the council, actually putting them on trial. He challenged their treatment of Jesus, by showing them that the one they had crucified had risen again. Instead of being defensive, the apostles went on the offensive. They had no hesitation in speaking out for God and presenting the good news to those leaders.

Then Peter then made the statement that Jesus was the cornerstone that the builders had rejected. The cornerstone unites two walls at the corner of a building and holds the building together. Peter said that the Jews rejected Jesus, but now Christ had become the cornerstone of the church. Without him there would be no church because the church wouldn't be able to stand.

Many people react negatively to the fact that there is no other name than that of Jesus to call upon for salvation. Yet this is not something the church decided. It is the specific teaching of Jesus himself. If God designated Jesus to be the Saviour of the world, no one else could be his equal.

Christians are to be open minded about many issues, but not on how we are saved from sin. No other religious leader could die for our sins. No other religious teacher came to earth as God's only son and no other religious teacher rose from the dead. It is Jesus and only Jesus who provided the way for an eternal relationship, there can be no other way.

Without doubt their words and boldness in speaking thus, really impressed these religious leaders. They couldn't believe that ordinary men, with no special education or training, could speak and behave as they did for what they believed, as these disciples did. The council were amazed at what being with Jesus had done for these men. A changed life convinces people of Christ's power.

Not often will sharing the good news send us to gaol as it did Peter and John, but we still run risks in trying to win others to Christ. We might be willing to face a night in gaol if it would bring 5,000 people to Christ, but shouldn't we be willing to suffer for even one? Nothing done for God is ever wasted.

The Holy Spirit gave Peter and John the courage and the words to challenge the Jewish religious leaders and they would go on to bring many more people to Christ during their lifetimes, but with the opposition they met from both Jewish and Roman leaders it was an uphill task.

As a body of Christ together they became accustomed to being challenged, imprisoned (although on this occasion they were soon released), knowing and being confident of their belief in the risen Christ, during the time they had spent with him whilst he was with them.

We too are challenged to be those people who carry the good news to the world and with all the awful things that we hear in our news on a daily basis, we need to be faithful and confident of our own faith in the risen Christ to face the world in which we live and where God has placed us.

This week we have seen the trial of a policeman, who has now been convicted of causing the death of a black man in America, something that was hoped for by the black community, who feel so undermined and discriminated against in that country. People like Martin Luther King, with his faith in God, helped to stamp out much of the terrible injustices in years past, but it is still happening and it takes a lot of faith and trust to believe that things can change in cultures that are so prejudiced. But faith can move mountains and small steps onto bigger ones. Christians in that part of the world know the part they have to keep playing to get others to believe in a God who wants justice and mercy for everyone to prevail.

Scripture gives us so many examples of the mercy and kindness of God, through the life, teachings and examples of Christ. No greater sacrifice will ever be made of us to find our way to the hope and joy of eternal life, as we live this resurrection life.

In the power of the Holy Spirit, we are all capable of sharing our faith. We have had limited contact with each other during the pandemic and the lockdowns, but as things ease, and we thank God for the wonderful success of our vaccination programme, we will find opportunities when we meet up again with our friends, families and colleagues, with whom we need to share the good news.

Our prayers and virtual contact during the lockdowns have taught us different ways of worshipping and keeping fellowship with one another. We may feel in isolation sometimes, but God never deserts us. He is with us in every aspect of our lives and it has been a learning curve of faith and perseverance to keep our relationships alive, to remember to thank God for all the good things in our lives.

We don't live in a country where we may be persecuted for our beliefs or for simply disagreeing with the authorities. We can go on praying for those who do, who suffer imprisonment, torture and even death for their opinions and

beliefs. Thinking of the media tycoon in Hong Kong who faces trial for treason just because he will not stop criticising the government and submit to unreasonable control of the people, at great personal cost. There are many others who have been badly treated in recent weeks.

May we in this Easter season, continue to trust and serve our amazing God to the best of our ability and faith. Amen.