

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 9th August 2009 - 11:30am
Acts 5:12-42

Introduction

The Early Church in Jerusalem has been passing through some testing times as we have made our way through these opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles.

As I said some weeks ago, 'The Blessings and the Buffetings usually go together in church life' – you rarely get one without the other!

We have seen the Great Blessing of the Day of Pentecost itself (ch.2)
We've seen the Great Blessing of the lame man being healed (ch.3)

Then we saw the First Buffeting with the arrest of Peter & John in Acts 4:3. On that occasion they were bound over to keep the peace, threatened and warned not to preach again in the name of Jesus, and then released.

Then we saw the Further Blessing of Fellowship among the believers

- They were enjoying fellowship with God (Acts 4:31)
- And practical sharing with each other in need (Acts 4:32-37)

Then last Sunday morning we saw the Buffeting caused by Sin in the Church, in Acts 5:1-10, as they faced their first problem from within the church itself. And this led to the loss of 2 members – Ananias & Sapphira.

But we finished last Sunday morning by saying, that although that event struck fear into the hearts of all who heard about it, eventually it resulted in more and more people getting saved and coming to join the ranks of the people of God, having first of all counted the cost. (Acts 5:14)

In fact Peter himself begins to take on somewhat of a 'cult status' in terms of his own personal popularity (Acts 5:15-16). Now this was not necessarily a good thing. It smacks a bit of superstition, believing that even Peter's shadow falling on them could cause by-standers to be healed. And yet we do read that *'all of them were healed'*. This seems to have been a particularly special time, when God was just pleased to work so much through his servants the apostles, that much blessing was seen in the surrounding community. The Church, and the Gospel they stood for, was certainly becoming very well known in and around Jerusalem at that time.

But this morning we come to look at more testing times for the early church. This time we see another wave of persecution being unleashed on the Apostles. It looks like they were ALL arrested in 5:18 and thrown into the public jail. Then they are flogged for the first time in ch.5:40, and then

threatened again not to preach or teach in the name of Jesus, and then they are released.

But in v.41 we are told that they went on their way *'rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name'* of Jesus! What an amazing attitude they had even through these tough and testing times!

But what can we learn from these testing times for the Church this morning? Well there are three tests that I want to highlight for you this morning:

1. The Test of True Preachers (vs.17-21)

We are told in v.17 that it was the Jewish High Priest and all his associates, particularly those who were members of the party of the Sadducees, who were filled with jealousy – and that's why they arrested all the apostles and put them in the public jail.

They basically rounded up all the leaders of the Christian Church in Jerusalem and threw them into prison, believing that this would put an end to their teaching and preaching, and all the miraculous events and healings that had been taking place in recent days. But they did it out of jealousy!!

Jealousy is an awful thing – particularly when it comes into inter-church relations. We shouldn't look down the road and become jealous because some other church is doing better than we are. Because they've got a better preacher than we have, or a better worship team, or better technology, or a more successful Holiday Bible Club programme than we have, or a better Youth Work or whatever. We should realise what John the Baptist realised back in John 3:27 *'A man (or a church) can receive only what is given him from heaven.'* And that was at a time when the Jews were getting worried about the fact that *'Jesus was gaining and baptising more disciples than John.'* (John 4:1). Jesus didn't enter into the argument at all – he just got off-side and headed for the obscurity of Samaria to meet with just one woman in particular – far away from the crowds that were flocking to him in Jerusalem.

The Sadducees in Acts ch.5 were 'sad you see' because they were playing the numbers game. People were leaving them and going off to join this new church that had come into being in Jerusalem. That's why they were jealous – that's why they were 'sad you see'!! Let's not be corrupted by jealousy in the Lord's work, let's take the attitude that Paul had in Philippians 1:15f

'It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love knowing that I am put here for the defence of the Gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.'

But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true – Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice!!'

That's the main thing. As long as Christ is preached, let's not worry about who's getting the biggest numbers. That's up to God, not us. So let's never be taken up with jealousy in the Lord's work here in Armagh.

So the Apostles were thrown in jail here in Acts ch.5:18, but the very next verse tells us that during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. That's all we're told. We're not given any more detail. It's told to us in a very matter-of-fact way, but anyway they're out of prison. But look at what the angel said to the Apostles in v.20:

*'Go, stand in the temple courts,' he said,
'and tell the people the full message of this new life.'*

And that to me is the Test of a True Preacher!

1. A true preacher will keep on preaching the Word of God, and preaching the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, *no matter how difficult life becomes for him*. We know of brothers and sisters in the house church movement in China who are in and out of prison all the time because they refuse to stop preaching the full message of this new life. They keep on going, come what may. As Christian preachers here in this country we get it so easy by comparison, but the challenge to us still stands – keep on preaching the full message of this new life! So the Apostles obeyed and went and did exactly what they were told. The very next verse tells us (v.21) *'At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.'* So that is the test of a true preacher – he will keep on preaching – no matter how difficult life becomes for him. Even in the face of threats they kept going. Because, bottom line, v.29, *'We must obey God rather than men!'*

2. But there's more to this test than at first meets the eye. The Angel said to them, *'Go...and tell the people the full message of this new life.'* (v.20). What does that mean? Well, it's a bit like what I was saying to you last Sunday morning. A true preacher of God's Word will not just stick to the easy passages, or the well worn texts of Scripture, he will preach the whole Counsel of God, as Paul puts it in Acts ch.20:20 & 27: *'You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you... (v.20)...For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will (Counsel) of God.'* (v.27).

And that is my job as a preacher, and as your pastor. I must be faithful in preaching to you from all of Scripture, and not dodging the more difficult passages. So that is why I preach the Bible verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book, so that you will get the full message of this new life, you will come to understand the whole Counsel of God.

3. But there's something else that I want to draw out of this challenging statement that the angel gave to the apostles. He said, 'Go...*and tell the people the full message of this new life.*' (v.20) and in the very next verse we read that the apostles obeyed, '*and began to teach the people.*'

And then if you go down to the very end of our passage to v.42 we read this: '*Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.*'

It's that double-barrelled approach that I want to draw your attention to here. They never stopped teaching and proclaiming, or teaching and preaching the good news. Some people accuse pastors like me of no longer *preaching* the Gospel. You could probably describe my ministry as more of a *teaching* style. By that I mean that I don't come across as a hell-fire preacher, dangling people over the pit, the way Gospel preachers of the past might have done it. But that is not to say that I am not a true preacher of the Gospel. If I am faithfully teaching my way through passages of Scripture as I come across them in the Acts of the Apostles or John's Gospel, or even in the Psalms on a Wednesday night, the Gospel will come out naturally, because it is certainly there.

People will hear the way of salvation, and they will regularly be invited to trust in Christ, but they will also be taught the full message of this new life. They will be taught what it means to trust in Christ as Saviour and Lord, they will be taught what it means to believe and be baptised, they will be taught what it means to be a good church member, and they will be taught what it means to live as a witness of Jesus Christ at home or abroad. They will be taught about how this world came into being, and how it is going to end. They will be taught about all sorts of things, because we are not afraid to deal with any subject that the Bible deals with. My aim will be to teach the full message of this new life. My aim will be to teach the whole Counsel of God.

So the test of a true preacher involves all three of those aspects: He will keep preaching the Word of God *no matter how difficult life becomes.* He will tell the people *the full message* of this new life, *not just the easy bits.* He will both *teach and preach* the good news of Jesus Christ, and God will apply its truths to the hearts and minds of his hearers as He wills.

My aim is not just to *preach the Gospel for a decision*, but to *teach the Gospel in order to make disciples.* That's the distinction that I'm trying to make. So that's the test of true preachers, but secondly...

2. The Test of True Christianity (vs.29-32)

So what is the full message of this new life? What all does it involve?

Well if we take a look at what Peter said to the Sanhedrin in vs.29-32 we can see that the Christian life is a life based entirely on:

(i) The death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ (v.30)

That is always Peter's key point. As Christians we are nothing in and of ourselves. Anything that we are, we are because of Him – Jesus Christ. The Jews put him to death, by hanging him on a tree. The Bible says, '*cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree.*' (Deuteronomy 21:23 & Galatians 3:13). We were under the curse of sin, so Jesus took that curse for us. '*He bore our sins in his body on that tree*' at Calvary, and having taken the punishment for the curse of our sin, he cried out '*It is finished*' and died in our place. Everything that was necessary to purchase our salvation was accomplished. The price had been paid, and to prove this, Jesus rose again from the dead on the third day – '*The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead!*' (v.30) and now '*God has exalted him to his own right hand (v.31) as our Prince and Saviour!*'

True Christianity must be based entirely upon the death, burial, resurrection and exaltation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Without that, we have no message.

(ii) The Christian life is a life of repentance and forgiveness of sin. (v.31)

Why did Jesus endure the cross, and all the suffering that involved?

Why did he do it? He did it entirely for us!

He was without sin. He was pure, spotless, and perfect. He didn't deserve any of the punishment that was meted out upon him. But he did it for us.

So that he could '*give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel*' (v.31).

So that the ability to turn from sin and all that we know to be wrong in our lives could be given to us as a free gift. So that forgiveness of sins, and peace with God could be given to us, granted to us as a free gift of God's grace.

That's why Jesus did it all for us.

There is no point in anybody preaching a Gospel that does not involve talking about sin. Because sin is right at the heart of what the Gospel is all about.

Christ died for sin. He became a sacrifice for sin, He broke the power of sin, and now he gives forgiveness of sins, to anyone who will repent of their sins, and in that moment they can know the peace of God flooding their hearts.

And yet many a 'gospel' presentation nowadays, will hardly mention sin!

That's not true Christianity - that is another gospel.

The Christian life is rooted in the death, burial, resurrection and exaltation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Christian life is a life of repentance and forgiveness of sins.

(iii) The Christian life is a life filled with the Holy Spirit (v.32)

And the Holy Spirit fills our lives for two main reasons: obedience and witness.

*'We are **witnesses** of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who **obey** him.'*

It's precisely because the Holy Spirit has been given to us at conversion, and has come to live in our hearts by faith, that we can now live this new life in a way that pleases the Lord.

The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the power to live this new life in all its fullness.

The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the ability to obey the Lord.

The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the desire to witness for Jesus.

We can do none of this in our own strength, or with our own energy.

It comes from God, by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

These are the Tests of True Christianity:

Do you base your life upon the death and resurrection of Jesus?

Does your life display the reality of repentance and forgiveness of sins?

Is your life empowered by the Holy Spirit so that you obey and witness for Jesus?

If not, then maybe what you've got is not true Christianity!

The test of true preachers. The test of true Christianity, and finally...

3. The Test of Time: (vs.33-42) – according to Gamaliel

When you read vs.21-26 it actually sounds quite comical.

The full assembly of the elders of Israel – The Sanhedrin (v.21) has been outwitted by the full number of the apostles, who they thought they had securely chained in prison overnight. When they go looking for them in the prison cells, someone comes to tell them that they are all out preaching and teaching in the Temple Courts, just as if they had never even been in prison!

But once they drag them before the Sanhedrin to give an account of themselves in v.27-32 and Peter says what he has to say, the members of the Sanhedrin are left furious and actually want to put all of the apostles to death, there and then! (v.33).

But it's one of the members of the Sanhedrin, a man called Gamaliel, who actually speaks up in their defence, a bit like Nicodemus did a short time earlier in defence of Jesus in John 7:50-52.

It's interesting that Gamaliel was a Pharisee, as opposed to a Sadducee. He was a teacher of the Law, and he had the respect of all the people. He stands to his feet, and orders that the apostles be put out of the Sanhedrin while he speaks to them in closed quarters.

Basically Gamaliel's advice...

1. Saved the lives of the Apostles (v.33, 40). Rather than being executed, they were flogged instead, warned not to preach in the name of Jesus and released.

2. Reminded the Sanhedrin of other leaders of little terrorist groups that had risen up, but their leaders had been martyred, and their organisations had fizzled out and come to nothing. He gave the example of Theudas (v.36) and Judas (v.37).

- But these were really leaders of politically motivated organisations.
- If politics is our motive then it will fizzle out. Politics come and go!
- If our desire is to see lost men and women won for Christ, then it will be blessed of God!

3. Left the verdict on the genuineness of Christianity in God's hands.

He says in vs.38-39:

*'If their purpose or activity is of human origins – it will fail.'
'If it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men;
you will only find yourselves fighting against God.'*

Has true Christianity failed? The answer is no, it hasn't – therefore it is not of human origin, it is of God.

Has it stood the test of time? The answer is yes.

For 2000 years God has kept a witness for himself somewhere in the world at any given time. Sometimes the witness of true Christianity has grown very small – especially in the dark ages, but today, the Evangelical Church worldwide is bigger than it has ever been before in history.

Even through persecution, the church just keeps on growing.

In Russia, Romania, China, South Korea, in Africa and in South America.

There are now more evangelicals in the Third World than in the West!

True Christianity, preaching the True Christian Gospel is a force to be reckoned with, because it is of God. Anyone who fights against it, only finds themselves fighting against God in the end!

Conclusion

Having said that, the Devil is a master of counterfeit, and he has made sure that counterfeit forms of the Christian church have endured through all these 2000 years as well, and indeed false world religions have endured as well.

So Gamaliel's advice might have been good advice, in that it spared the lives of the apostles, but his argument doesn't always hold true. There is plenty of false religion still around today as well, which has withstood the test of time.

But what we can say is that the true Church of Jesus Christ, preaching the true Gospel will continue until the end of time, and when we get to heaven we will discover that the True Church has become a great multitude that no-one can count, from every tribe, and language, and people and nation. (Rev 7:9).

My question to you, is, are you a True Christian?

