

## **“The Reality of Opposition and the Church's Response”**

07 March 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

### **Welcome & Call To Worship**

**Hymn of Preparation:** MP 454 Majesty

### **Prayers of Adoration & Confession**

**Reading:** Acts 4:1-31

### **Sermon:**

When something good happens we applaud the good. We stand to praise, we clap our hands, and we say well done. We have recently applauded our health care staff in recognition of the great work they have done and continue to do in treating people who have Covid and those who do not. Jerusalem has just witnessed an incredible miracle - a man with a congenital foot and ankle disorder (possibly club feet) who never walked now had been wonderfully healed in the name of Jesus. He is up and about walking and leaping, completely better. Everyone had seen this and in v.21-22, Luke notes *“all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.”* The response of the people is easily understood and appropriate because this was a good thing. Yet not everyone is happy with what is happening and Ch. 4 outlines the opposition to Peter and John, to Jesus and to the gospel by a group called the Sadducees (v.1) who had a strong influence on the Sanhedrin (v.5, 15), the leaders of the Jewish nation and religion. So today, we want to explore the reality of opposition to the Church and the Apostles' (Church's) response to it.

### **I. The Reality of Opposition**

*The Source (v.1-7)*

**The Sadducees** were a well-connected group of influential, privileged, elite men who had considerable influence within the Jewish ruling authority, the Sanhedrin. Politically, they collaborated with the Roman authorities, which allowed them to do business and thrive. Theologically, they believed the Messianic period began at the time of the Maccabean uprising, a time before Jesus (167-160 BC). They were Jewish nationalists and consequently they were not looking for a Messiah. And they opposed any idea of resurrection of the dead. (Luke 20:27 - they had asked Jesus a question about this hoping to trick Him.)

**The Jewish high priests.** Luke names some of the main leaders in verse 6 and the names are familiar: Annas, who had been deposed by the Romans and was succeeded by his son-in-law, Caiaphas. Both were involved in the trial of Jesus.

Luke tells us they were greatly disturbed (v.2) by what the Apostles were saying about the reality of the resurrection of the dead in Jesus. It upset them, annoyed them, exasperated them. Let us put ourselves in the moment: the general population is praising God, the man who could not walk is standing beside Peter and John (v.14) and they (the Jewish leaders) are trying to find a way to stop them from speaking the name of Jesus. What was there to get greatly disturbed about? It appears nothing, nothing at all. Not even evidence of a wonderful miracle convinces them. However, that does not mean that the gospel is

ineffective, because in v.4 we read that many believed, and the number of men (probably not counting women and children) grew to 5000. The gospel is heard, a miracle is witnessed; some believe and some do not - they oppose.

How does the Bible explain that? In John's gospel, the exact same scenario happened to Jesus which we read about in Ch. 12: 37ff. The answer given is that responsibility lies with the person, but points to an underlying spiritual condition of being spiritually dead, of dullness of heart, being spiritually blind. The root cause of this is Satan (Isaiah 6:10; John 12:40; 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 4:4). *"The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."* They were threatened - their power, their cosy relationship with the Romans, their beliefs, their influence. They had so much to lose if this message spread. The one they wanted dead and conspired to have killed had risen and the message they opposed was spreading. Everything they lived for was being challenged. So, they failed to listen and denied the evidence. They were responsible. Ultimately the source of the opposition is Satan, the god of this earth and his work in the hearts and minds of people. Understanding that source will influence how we deal with the reality of opposition. The individuals are responsible, and Satan is the ultimate source of opposition, and he uses individuals to oppose the Church.

## II. The Response to Opposition

### A. Their Defence (v.8-14)

It is easy to forget that Peter and John are not superhuman, but men who have faced such danger in the past due to Jesus and been found wanting, keeping their distance, and denying him. They are not blind to the injustice that is likely to come from this court and the track record of those who preside. Their reputation regarding the things of Jesus was only hostile. They were not advocates of justice but of their own thinking. Yet the narrative is positive; they experience the filling of the Holy Spirit as the promise of Jesus that words will be given is honoured (Luke 12:11-12; 21:44). They are confident, emboldened, and direct when asked in v.7, *"By what power or what name did you do this?"*.

Peter's opening salvo puts his accusers on the back foot (v.9) and he gives all the credit for the miracle to the power and authority contained in the name of Jesus Christ. Pointedly, he says again, *"whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead"* (v.10). As confirmation, he uses the reference from Psalm 118, a metaphor where the different groups are easily identified. The builders are the members of the Sadducees and Sanhedrin and the capstone is Jesus, whom they emphatically rejected. It is fascinating to think of how Peter and John so readily remembered the words of Jesus (Matt 21:42) in the right context. It is the very same verse He used when telling the Jewish authorities how they had repeatedly rejected God's attempts to speak to them through the prophets and through Himself, the Son of God. Peter speaks of the fruit of the ministry, the healing, and easily moves from the healing to salvation. He affirms that only Jesus can save, no one else, no other name to affirm the positive; only Jesus saves.

Their defence is striking, and it was noted by those who heard them speak (v.13). Peter and John were confident, courageous, wise, and simply spoke the truth of what they knew and had experienced. As a result, they honoured Jesus, giving glory to His name and were able to do so by the power of the Holy Spirit, as promised by Jesus.

The idea that the court took note of the fact they had been with Jesus most likely means they thought the same about Jesus (John 7:15), an unschooled and ordinary man.

As I hope you are aware, one of our deep desires in ARPC is to be encouraged to speak about Jesus. This passage confirms that to do so is good and the work of the Holy Spirit. There is no reason to not be confident about what is true and good, and there is no reason to think a formal and theological training is necessary before we speak of what we know and experience; God promises to help us. We speak because we have been with Jesus and are in relationship with Him (v.13). In the Lenten devotionals, our 3D groups and personal conversations, we encourage you to speak about Jesus. Mostly that will be in the normal circumstances of life, but it may be as our defence against opposition.

### **B. The outcome (v.14-22)**

As we noted in the introduction, having as evidence a man well known to the whole community who was crippled from birth, is now over 40 years old, is standing in their presence, is not being carried, is not deformed, is not sad or helpless but completely better, washes away all argument, and so there is nothing to be said (v.15): *“There was nothing they could say.”*

Therefore, they warn Peter and John to stop speaking “in this name”. After Peter rebuffs them (v.18-20), they issue threats, most likely saying something like if this happens again you will not be so lucky, it will be jail for you! It is important to note that they do not try to discredit their belief in the resurrection, nor bring any counter arguments. And they cannot say the name Jesus - they hate that name, they are blind to the beauty and power of His name. Their intent was to stop the spreading of the name of Jesus and the gospel; they were denying people the opportunity to come to repentance and faith. However, they let them go. Regardless, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. As Jesus is our judge, that is the only verdict that matters. Be encouraged to speak for Jesus.

### **C. Their response (v.23-31)**

*Share the experience with other trusted Christians.*

Peter and John went back to their own people, probably not the whole church (considering their size), but family, friends and fellow believers (a home group or a 3D group). This was koinonia at work, their experience of fellowship and their devotion to it. They shared their experience and found comfort, but primarily they prayed. I was privileged to experience the wonder of such fellowship this week as a group of people from ARPC gathered to pray via Zoom for someone dear to us who is sick. We were joined by others from around the world who used to worship with us and were part of our previous home group. I mention this because the focus of our meeting was prayer. We laughed, we cried, and we passionately brought different situations to God in prayer. It was koinonia and I found it extremely precious.

*Pray together.*

This is perhaps the most important response to opposition and the content of the prayer will be helpful to us as we face opposition. They started by acknowledging God and who He is:

- Sovereign (*Lord/Master*)
- Creator (*You made*)
- The God who reveals, (*You spoke*)
- The God of History (*You decided beforehand*)

They orientate themselves, getting the focus off the problem and onto the majesty of the Lord God, Who in every aspect of the situation is in control and able to help in whatever way He deems necessary! To help them do this, they use Scripture. They speak it back to God and contemplate its meaning. Psalm 2 was a coronation psalm asking for God's protection of the king from his enemies. It recognises the reality of opposition and asks for God's help in the face of it.

They get to the point of reviewing recent history - their experience - and they can say with confidence even when it involved kings, specifically Herod, and rulers, specifically Pilate, or all the secular and religious authorities of the day, "*they did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen*" (v.27-28).

Then they asked for three things from their sovereign God.

1. Consider their threats.
2. Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.
3. Continue to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders.

. . . through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.

They do not ask for the threat to cease or be eased, or for justice directly. They hand it over to God and ask Him, as Judge, to consider the opposition and their threats. Their focus is, instead, on being enabled to continue to speak the word of God, to talk of Jesus, to be filled with the Holy Spirit. They want God to continue doing powerful signs and wonders to enable the spread of the good news and to lift the misery of those oppressed by sin and Satan.

The house shakes, which as Calvin notes is not of physical benefit to them, but it reassures them of the presence of God and their prayer being heard. They then go out and are enabled to speak the word of God boldly.

Accepting the reality of opposition to Jesus and its ultimate source, Satan, shapes our response. The Church's response is to entrust everything to God and continue to proclaim Jesus. It is a spiritual fight fought with spiritual weapons in the company of fellow believers who desire above all else to honour Jesus and proclaim Him. When we walk in that direction, when we have that desire, God is pleased to hear us and answer.

**Praise:** IPH 414 Hallelujah! What A Saviour! (Man of Sorrows)

**Prayers for Others**

**Announcements**

**Closing Hymn:** O Church, Arise (Arise, Shine)

**Benediction:** “To Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through JESUS CHRIST our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.” (Jude 1:24-25)

**Discussion & Application:**

Why were the Sadducees so opposed to what Peter and John were doing?

Read Luke 12:11-12; 21:44. What is the promise in these verses? How do you see this promise answered for Peter and John in Acts 4?

What do the Apostles do upon their release and what is the content of their prayer?

How should we respond when we face opposition to Jesus or our Christian views?