

“Acting on Acts”

‘Breakfast and the Bible’/‘Supper with the Scriptures’

Acts 4:1-22

The Acts of the Apostles is unique in the Bible. It’s an account of the exciting events which followed the resurrection of Jesus and the genesis of the first communities of his followers. Acts starts with the return of Jesus to heaven (the Ascension), continues with the coming of God’s Holy Spirit (Pentecost) upon the first believers, and goes on to describe how those first followers of Jesus were equipped to continue his work on earth and to take that message far away from Jerusalem and into Europe.

The author of Acts is widely thought to be St. Luke, who also wrote the Gospel that bears his name. Although he probably never met Jesus face-to-face, Luke gathered together the eyewitness accounts of those who did and has faithfully passed them on to us. But he did witness the miraculous growth and work of the first Christians and this too we can read, thanks to his hard work.

In Chapters 1-3, we have learned: that Jesus taught his disciples for forty days after his resurrection, told them to wait for the coming of his Holy Spirit, was ‘taken up to heaven’, and how, ten days later, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. On that day, Peter preached powerfully and the number of believers grew from 120 to over 3000! Luke has told us that the fledgling church met for teaching, fellowship, sharing the Lord’s Supper and prayer. Peter then heals a man crippled from birth, invoking the name of Jesus Christ. This provokes awe and wonder from the crowd, whereupon Peter seizes the opportunity to tell them why Jesus came, died and rose again and invites them to repent.

Trouble! (1-12)

It is not long before the authorities intervene! We have seen this before when Jesus was preaching, the religious leaders hanging around at the edge of the crowd eavesdropping and checking out this new wonder-worker for ‘soundness’. Verse 1 suggests that they actually interrupted Peter and John. The sticking point was the claim that Jesus has been resurrected, “When God raised up his servant...” (3:26). Of course, there was a strong vested interest. It was the religious authorities who had asked the Romans to crucify Jesus and now here were two of his followers who claimed that Jesus was ‘God’s servant’ and that he was now alive! No wonder they panicked! What they thought was a fairly harmless new group of ‘keenies’ within Judaism were starting to over-step the mark – as far as they were concerned. This needed nipping in the bud! Not surprisingly they sent the ‘captain of the Temple guard’ – the second in command to the High Priest – to investigate. With him were ‘the Sadducees’ a group which did not believe in the resurrection and people with whom Jesus had had several disagreements – see e.g. Luke 20:27-40.

Their response was to remove Peter and John from the Temple courts and from contact with the public by putting them in custody overnight – perhaps because it was now nearly evening and too late for a hearing by the authorities. Because Peter and John were in the Temple precincts, the authorities had the legal power to do this. No doubt Peter would have been aware of this, but didn’t flinch from speaking the truth. But despite their removal, the word was out and, remarkably, another 2000 people had become believers!

The trial the following day was in front of the top brass (5-6) – notably the high priest, Annas plus the rulers (priests), elders (lay leaders of the community) and teachers (mostly lawyers of the party of the Pharisees). Together they formed the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body. In other words, they were taking this extremely seriously! They thought they had got rid of Jesus and were probably just relaxing after the furore at the previous Passover, and now it all looked ominously like things were going wrong (in their view) again. The question to Peter and John (verse 7) is a perfectly fair one; they recognised that the power to heal a crippled man must be super-natural.

Peter's response is inspired and undergirded by the Holy Spirit. The phrase in verse 8 is interesting: although Peter had already had the Holy Spirit breathed upon him by Jesus on the evening of Easter Day (John 20:22) and been baptised in the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2: 4), Luke is quite clear that Peter received another anointing of the Holy Spirit in order to respond to the particular challenge before him at that time. We see this later in Acts, in 4:31, 7:55, and 13:9. And we have already seen it in the life of Jesus. He was born of the Spirit (Luke 1:35) and yet he received a special anointing of the Spirit at his baptism (Luke 3:22) as he began his earthly ministry. It seems that receiving the Holy Spirit is not a one-off event. We may have been baptized in the Holy Spirit, but we need to 'go on being' baptised in the Holy Spirit. It is encouraging to learn that God gives a special gifting of the Spirit to help us at the times of particular challenge.

Peter's response is respectful and to the point. As followers of Jesus, we must always strive to be respectful of others, even if they treat us shabbily. But Peter does not beat around the bush – his answer is simple, direct and truthful and he does not shirk from saying things which he knows will be contentious. Indeed, the court actually gives him the opportunity to preach the good news again – and this time to all the 'movers and shakers'. Not only does he make it clear that it is in the name of the Jesus that he healed the crippled man but that Jesus was the very person whom they had killed and yet God had raised (10). So he was going to the very heart of the issue – not the fact that a crippled man had been healed but that the Jewish leaders had rejected the special servant of God – the Messiah. Serious stuff indeed!

Peter knows his scriptures and quotes from the Psalms in order to back up his assertions. It shows the importance of knowing God's word and being able to apply it in our daily lives. This he uses to claim that Jesus is the only way to salvation. This was implicitly putting Jesus on a par with God, because the Jews believed that God alone could save (see Isaiah 43: 11).

Courage (13-22)

Even though the words of Peter were no doubt upsetting the court, Luke recalls that the hearers were struck by the way in which Peter and John gave account of themselves, and in particular, their courage. When we are called to give account of our faith, it is not just what we say that bears witness to Jesus, but how we say it. People may disagree with our words, but our sincerity, integrity and passion for Jesus can often speak louder than our words and be the thing touches others most powerfully. (No wonder that, later on in Acts, the disciples prayed specifically for boldness and unashamedness in front of others (4:29 and 31)). Here were men who were not experts in theology presenting arguments which the experts found it hard to gainsay (14). Perhaps they remembered how hard it was to win an argument with Jesus! No doubt Peter and John recalled Jesus' words to his disciples that he would give them the words to say in difficult situations (Luke 21:15).

The authorities found themselves in a difficult situation; the miracle was undeniable and now well-known in the city, but the implications of the teaching that went with it were

truly alarming to their power-base. So they instructed Peter and John to stop preaching about Jesus (18). This was a first offence, and it would have been customary under Jewish Law to issue a warning, on the basis that Peter and John might have not deliberately set out to oppose the authorities. If they continued, then they could be prosecuted for the serious offence of contempt of court. But any hope that a second offence would not be committed was immediately dashed by Peter's response, namely that they were answerable first to God for what they said, rather than a human court. Incidentally, this does not give us *carte blanche* to disregard a legally constituted human court! (Scripture tells us to respect and obey the human authorities (see e.g. Romans 13:1-7)). But where the court's ruling is in direct opposition to a clear command of Jesus (in this case to preach the gospel (Matt. 28:20)) then we are to conclude that we have no choice but to disregard the ruling of a human authority(20). And the motives of the human court in question were clearly heavily influenced by self-interest and not true justice. Not only that, but they realised that the 'popular vote' was with Peter and John (21).

It is worth adding that, when a second offence was committed (Acts 5:17-42), the authorities were far bolder in their actions. On that occasion, Luke tells us that the motivation of at least part of the Sanhedrin, the Sadducees, was jealousy (5:17) and a fear that they were being blamed for the death of God's special servant (5:28). The response was to demand the death penalty which, on the advice of a wise Pharisee, Gamaliel, was commuted to a flogging (5:40) – a very harsh punishment nevertheless. The Church must be ready to stand up for Jesus, but also pay the price of doing so – which will often be painful. Yet the response of the apostles was to rejoice at suffering for the name of Jesus (5:41), something Peter teaches in his first letter, written later (1 Peter 4:13).

As Christians, we are called to speak and act in response to the calling that we have received from Jesus. This will inevitably lead us, at times, to cross swords with the God-denying views and self-interest of the world around us. Opposition should not surprise us (1 Peter 4:12)! But Jesus' promise that he will give to his disciples the words to say and the strength to endure also holds true because the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives. Indeed, the testimony of many Christians is that their faith grows most strongly and is displayed most clearly precisely at those times of opposition and testing. It seems that many of the gifts of the Spirit are designed to be deployed on the front line! And we will never be tested beyond what we can bear.

Many forces are at work across the world are trying to gag the church of Christ today, but the witness of history is that God has somehow enabled faithful men and woman to continue "teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:42).