

## Littelbourne Sunday 31 July 2022 - Peter and John before the Sanhedrin – Peter Hollander

*4 The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. 2 They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. 3 They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. 4 But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand. 5 The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. 6 Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. 7 They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: 'By what power or what name did you do this?' 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: 'Rulers and elders of the people! 9 If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, 10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. 11 Jesus is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone." 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.' 13 When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished, and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. 14 But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. 15 So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. 16 'What are we going to do with these men?' they asked. 'Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. 17 But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.' 18 Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John replied, 'Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! 20 As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.' 21 After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. 22 For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.*

Last week we saw how Peter boldly addressed the crowd and told them that they had killed the Messiah and that they needed to repent. The good news was that Jesus, the Messiah was alive, risen from the dead, and able to forgive them. This was the second time that St Peter preached the Gospel to a crowd: this time drawing them in by healing of the man lame from birth. Peter mentions that what has been prophesied has come to pass, that Jesus is the Messiah, that the Holy Spirit is able to touch all men, that Jesus will return and that men need to repent to receive forgiveness of sins. The crowd knew the lame man and the temple authorities couldn't intervene to stop Peter preaching the Gospel. They waited for an opportunity. Remember it was 3 pm when the lame man was healed. It was evening, some hours later, when Peter and John were seized and jailed. Verse 1 says that the priests, captain of the guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. Both disciples were still talking to people nearly three hours after the healing of the lame man. The temple officials didn't like what they were hearing. Talk of resurrection would have upset the Sadducees, who didn't believe in it. Remember in Mark's Gospel Chapter 12 how Jesus dealt with the Sadducees who asked the odd question about a man with six brothers, all of whom died one after the other and each had to marry the widow of their dead brother. Who would the wife be married to at the resurrection? Jesus told them that in heaven, there wouldn't be anyone who was married or engaged to be married: they would be like angels.

Talk of Jesus would have upset the chief priests who demanded his crucifixion with the expectation that the followers of Jesus would drift away, like the followers of others claiming to be the Messiah or a prophet. What was happening was not what the temple authorities expected: the number of people accepting Jesus as the Messiah was increasing, and what is more this healing miracle was being claimed as being down to Jesus rather than God Himself. The Holy Trinity didn't exist in the minds of the Jews then and still doesn't today. The concept of Father, Son and Holy Ghost as a single triune Godhead had not been formulated, least of all by the disciples who weren't theologians.

The captain of the temple guard was likely to have been a Roman officer put there with some men to keep order, and for a quiet life, as we have seen with Pilate, he would usually do what the chief priests and temple authorities wanted so long as it didn't impose on Roman rule and prevented any rebellious activity. So Peter and John are

taken to the cells and then Luke reports that *“many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.”* Three thousand on Pentecost, and now another two thousand on this day.

There was a quick trial, not illegally at night as with Jesus, but in the morning. Some of the names of the men in the council of the rulers, elders and scribes trying Peter and John are recorded by Luke. Annas and Caiaphas seem to have alternated as high priests, while John and Alexander and others were all related to them. In the New International Version, verse 7 says: *They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them.* This doesn't set the scene very well. In the King James it says *“And when they had set them in the midst, they asked,”* and the Greek says *“and having stood them in the midst, inquired”.* The council sat in a circle and those accused would be made to stand or sit in the middle of the circle, while onlookers were hanging around outside the circles. This will intimidate those accused, with people all around you, many of whom you cannot see to the side and behind. Then the question asked was phrased in such a way to make the accused incriminate himself because he had no authority from the Council of rulers, elders and scribes. *“By what power or what name did you do this?”* it was the same question asked of Jesus recorded in Mark 11:27-33 *They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. <sup>28</sup> ‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ they asked. ‘And who gave you authority to do this?’ <sup>29</sup> Jesus replied, ‘I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. <sup>30</sup> John’s baptism – was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!’ <sup>31</sup> They discussed it among themselves and said, ‘If we say, “From heaven,” he will ask, “Then why didn’t you believe him?” <sup>32</sup> But if we say, “Of human origin” . . .’ (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.) <sup>33</sup> So they answered Jesus, ‘We don’t know.’ Jesus said, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.’* Peter does give an answer to their question but there is an assumption in his tone that the rulers and elders who claim to know all things should already know the answer their own question. We're back to a theme throughout the whole of the Bible which is that the people entrusted to be the guardians of the Law (the priests, rulers and elders of Israel) and who are supposed to know the will of God are almost always ignorant of, or unwilling to accept, what the Holy Spirit is saying when someone filled with His Spirit speaks. This occasion is no different, but Peter tells them bluntly what they really don't want to hear, but cannot refute. Verse 8 onwards: *Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: ‘Rulers and elders of the people! <sup>9</sup> If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, <sup>10</sup> then know this, you and all the people of Israel: it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. <sup>11</sup> Jesus is “the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.” <sup>12</sup> Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.’* Being called to account for an act of kindness as if this were a criminal act would be bizarre to everyone. The Holy Spirit of God speaking through Peter puts the Council in its place and boldly reveals the truth to them: they crucified the Messiah, and have blood on their hands.

Verse 13-14 <sup>13</sup> *When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished, and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. <sup>14</sup> But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say.* The Council was this time surrounded by onlookers and the man who had been healed. They had no credible explanation for the healing themselves, they had nothing in the Law of Moses that they could accuse Peter and John, of breaking. So they did what all those who know they that they are in the wrong do: hide from those they accuse and onlookers to decide together how to get out of a tricky situation.

Verses 15-17 <sup>15</sup> *So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. <sup>16</sup> ‘What are we going to do with these men?’ they asked. ‘Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. <sup>17</sup> But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.’* There was nothing the Council could do because all Jerusalem knew what had happened. So they resorted to their fallback position which was that only they had authority to decide what God was saying and that these men were out of line theologically by using the name of Jesus to heal people. People would be expected to accept their authority on theological matters, and as they refused to accept Jesus was the Messiah, anything done in his name was unacceptable... and still is two thousand years later among those who do not accept him as Messiah and saviour of mankind. Many in Jerusalem would have known that Jesus healed the sick, restored sight to the blind and healed the lame. His name was well known and the Council feared the people, in the same way they feared the people when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt a few months earlier. What they didn't expect was a blanket refusal from Peter and John to accept they had the authority to deny them from telling

people about Jesus. Verses 18-20 <sup>18</sup> Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. <sup>19</sup> But Peter and John replied, 'Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! <sup>20</sup> As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'

This was a direct challenge to the Council: the same as Jesus gave them when asking about John's baptism – whether it was from heaven or of human origin. The same issue arose: why don't they believe that Jesus is who he says he is? They know the people who have seen what he did, know that miracles are from God. God spoke to Moses who came down from the mountain and found the people who had seen the miracles of God worshipping a golden calf, saying in Deuteronomy 9:13-14 <sup>13</sup> And the LORD said to me, "I have seen this people, and they are a stiff-necked people indeed! <sup>14</sup> Let me alone, so that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven. And I will make you into a nation stronger and more numerous than they." Moses had to plead for God to forgive them. Two thousand years later Jesus died on the cross to save this stiff-necked people. Nothing had changed. Miracles, healings, signs and wonders failed to impress those who refuse acknowledge the love of God for his creation. The Sanhedrin knew only a God who was wrathful and had to be appeased with sacrifices and obedience to rules made all the more hard to keep by knifepicking men. They usually tried to avoid the way of love which involved loving one's neighbour as oneself.

<sup>21</sup> After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. <sup>22</sup> For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

The Sanhedrin feared the people and knew they had no charges to bring to Peter and John. While the people were praising God for what those without serious theological knowledge could see was obviously from God, the learned theologians were pondering how to stop something good from happening in future from which they would be out of the loop. It was all about control for them, all about their own positions of authority, all about their own self importance. But in the face of the fact a 40 year old lame from birth was now walking and was with the apostles and a crowd praising God, they could do nothing but let Peter and John go.

Going on to some points to take home with you which are: (1) **If this story happened today, what would it look like?** (2) **What is this story saying to us today?** (3) **Could the story make a difference to my life? If so, how?**

**If this happened today, what would it look like?** People would be as astonished if someone they knew disabled from birth were healed. Many would praise God for a miracle. The medical professionals would be sceptical and the atheists would say there is a scientific explanation, without saying what that might be. Most sceptics would just dismiss this as a news story which they consider unbelievable and so ignore it. If the number of witnesses is large... as it was in Jerusalem where thousands witnessed this healing, then the news story would be more believed and if the healed person were interviewed in the media along with family and his own doctor. But after a lot of coverage after a week or two it would be forgotten.

**What is this story saying to us today?** The power of Holy Spirit is the same today, yesterday and tomorrow. Miracles still happen, but they happen so that God may be glorified. The stiff-necked people of all faiths and nations will still deny that God can heal. The world always denies the supernatural power of God and seeks to exclude God from the decisions made and the way we live. How bad does it have to get before this nation turns away from its wicked ways and turns to God? Would a miracle change anything at all?

**Could the story make a difference to my life? If so, how?** God can use unschooled ordinary people who have faith and who love Jesus to do things prompted by Holy Spirit which will change lives. Head knowledge of God, the head knowledge that the rulers and elders in the Temple at Jerusalem had, is not enough to know God. Heart knowledge is needed: this requires acknowledgment of one's own sinfulness and need of forgiveness, coupled with the desire to invite the Holy Spirit into one's life and being. Without the transforming power of the Holy Spirit we will do things in our own strength and think that is all there is. There is more: we need the Holy Spirit to walk with Jesus, to guide us, to enable us to do what He wants us to do. This requires us to listen to Him, to spend time with Him and to obey what He tells us. God is love. Thank God for Jesus. To end, what Paul wrote to the Romans is as true today as it was 2,000 years ago.

Romans 10 *Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. <sup>2</sup> For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. <sup>3</sup> Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. <sup>4</sup> Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. <sup>5</sup> Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law: 'The person who does these things will live by them. <sup>6</sup> But the righteousness that is by faith says: 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) <sup>7</sup> 'or "Who will descend into the deep?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). <sup>8</sup> But what does it say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: <sup>9</sup> if you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. <sup>11</sup> As Scripture says, 'Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.' <sup>12</sup> For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, <sup>13</sup> for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' <sup>14</sup> How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? <sup>15</sup> And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' <sup>16</sup> But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' <sup>17</sup> Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ. <sup>18</sup> But I ask: did they not hear? Of course they did: 'Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.' <sup>19</sup> Again I ask: did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, 'I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.' <sup>20</sup> And Isaiah boldly says, 'I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.' <sup>21</sup> But concerning Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.'*

We pray for the peace of Jerusalem and that Israel may turn to you, Lord Jesus. We ask you to bless Israel so that we too may be blessed. We pray for peace in our nation and that all may turn to you Lord Jesus. Would you in your grace and mercy, pour out your blessings on this nation, even though we don't deserve them. We thank you Lord that you are rich in mercy and love.