

The apostles persecuted – Littlebourne – Sunday 16th October 2022 – Peter Hollander

¹⁷ Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ²⁰ 'Go, stand in the temple courts,' he said, 'and tell the people all about this new life.' ²¹ At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin – the full assembly of the elders of Israel – and sent to the jail for the apostles. ²² But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, ²³ 'We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.' ²⁴ On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to. ²⁵ Then someone came and said, 'Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.' ²⁶ At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them. ²⁷ The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸ 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,' he said. 'Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.' ²⁹ Peter and the other apostles replied: 'We must obey God rather than human beings! ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead – whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.' ³³ When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. ³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honoured by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. ³⁵ Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: 'Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. ³⁶ Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. ³⁷ After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. ³⁸ Therefore, in the present case I advise you: leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.' ⁴⁰ His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. ⁴² 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 Messiah.

It is clear that the Temple authorities were increasingly peeved with the apostles. As we saw in Mark's Gospel, the Jewish religious leaders were more interested in their positions of respect and standing in the community than anything else. The Temple was deemed to be their territory and day after day these Galilean fishermen were undermining their authority with talk about Jesus being killed by them and with signs and wonders that none of them could refute or replicate. Like all in authority, any contrary view to the received wisdom of the authorities was not acceptable and needed to be silenced. Luke states that the reason the Sadducees hated Peter and the apostles was jealousy. The Sadducees denied the resurrection of the dead and the existence of angels and spirits. They basically accepted just the five books of Moses as Scripture and none of the oral traditions of the people, nor the books of the prophets where the coming of the Messiah is foretold. They were the upper classes in charge of the Temple. They could see that people were being healed and were jealous of this ability as well as jealous that these "ignorant" Galileans were getting a following that

undermined them as leaders of men. Earlier they had told the apostles to keep quiet (Acts 4) after putting them in jail because the Temple guard did their bidding.

This time, perhaps days or at most a few weeks later, they sent in the Temple guard again to lock up the apostles. This time an angel opened the jail doors and gave them an instruction: *'Go, stand in the temple courts, and tell the people all about this new life.'* The supernatural intervention was another thing that would have upset the Sanhedrin. A claim that an angel had unlocked the jail doors allowing them to leave unseen and leave the doors locked shattered their theology.

Unlike the unlawful hearing of Jesus done before daybreak, this time the Sanhedrin arrived shortly after dawn, to sit in judgment over the men who disobeyed their earlier instructions. Embarrassingly the prisoners were no where to be found and the guards hadn't left their posts, and the doors were all locked. The chief priests and the guards were flummoxed, and humiliated when someone said that the apostles were out there in the Temple courts speaking to the people again.

However fearful of the people, apparently ready to stone them, the guards had to be careful and ask if the apostles they wouldn't mind coming along and please would they attend a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

Last time the high priest was named as Ananias or Annas, but is unnamed this time. He doesn't ask a question, but makes a statement instead: *'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,' he said. 'Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.'* The issue is clear: they don't like the accusation that they killed Jesus who is now being said to be the Messiah. They resent their authority being undermined and they resent being guilty of killing an innocent man. These are natural reactions and are entirely rational from their viewpoint. The answer they from Peter is much the same as the one they had heard earlier: *We must obey God rather than human beings!*³⁰ *The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead – whom you killed by hanging him on a cross.*³¹ *God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.*³² *We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.'*

Three points to really antagonise Sadducees would be (1) mentioning the resurrection of a dead man, (2) that they killed the Messiah and (3) that there is a Holy Spirit which can be given to men who obey God. They were now as livid as they were when they condemned Jesus and in their fury wanted to have the apostles put to death.

Then we have Gamaliel – a man wiser than most of the Sanhedrin, who stated something that was obvious to everyone. Religious imposters had come and gone; their followers melting away when they died. Oddly though he didn't suggest having the apostles killed to see if their followers melted away, as presumably it was the Romans who killed Theudas and Judas the Galilean, but instead made probably the wisest statement to come out of the Sanhedrin which is as good today as it was then. *Therefore, in the present case I advise you: leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail.*³⁹ *But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.'* If the activity is of human origin it will fail, but if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men: you will find yourselves fighting against God. Tradition has it that Gamaliel was a Pharisee who did believe in the resurrection of the dead and the other books of the Old Testament, which prophesied the coming of the Messiah. No one doubted the miracles were happening, and no one doubted that people were indeed listening to the message of salvation offered by the apostles. What is surprising is that the Sanhedrin were persuaded to let the apostles go, but not without a flogging, given their previous solution to deal

with dissent was death which would silence dissent permanently. Perhaps given that there were twelve apostles and hundreds of followers in the Temple courts who were baying for blood, trying to make examples of these men wasn't going to be as easy as it was with Jesus.

So the apostles disobeyed the Sanhedrin and carried on doing what they were doing before: teaching in the houses and Temple daily.

So what can we take from this passage for today?

Those in authority over us often base their judgments not on facts but their own opinions. We are supposed to be living in an age of reason, where decisions are not influenced by jealousy or wounded pride. Yet when people have power, rationality is often overruled by injured pride, offence taking, jealousy, envy, contrariness towards opponents and ideology which may or may not be based on reality. There is also plain stupidity that allows seemingly clever people with power to do things that with hindsight even they could see were unwise. We can but pray for those in authority and pray that they accept Jesus as saviour. The focus of the apostles was Jesus and glorifying Him and God, and not submitting to the authorities – the Sanhedrin – who had no real grounds to persecute them. Gamaliel's wisdom carried the day – but only because God's hand was able to steer the Council in a direction that hardly any of them really wanted to go.

We have Holy Spirit to guide us, and the Word of God. If we restrict our understanding to rules and regulations without actually seeking a relationship with God, we will be like the Sanhedrin, who were interested in their own position out of pride, self-importance, dignity and envy. Envy that the apostles were performing miracles that they knew could only be from God, and which they were powerless to perform themselves. Humility and preferring others above ourselves can be learnt, but without love, it will be like those who are proud to be humble! The apostles were clear... nothing they did was of themselves, and everything was of the Lord Jesus.

Sometimes we may be mocked or denigrated for being Christians... this is usually by those who don't know you, rather than work colleagues, friends, neighbours. Like Peter, we need to have a response that is Holy Spirit led, and which addresses the issue. A response that is done with gentleness and kindness, yet provides an answer that points to Jesus is what we need to have, and knowing the Word of God really helps for there are answers to most questions that are put to Christians. Silence may be the Holy Spirit led response, or it may be something else that Holy Spirit would like to be said, that really speaks into the life of the mocker. Human beings were made to have relationship with God, to be loved by God and to love God. He changed the minds of the Sanhedrin on this occasion against all expectations of themselves... He can do the same today to sinners full of their own self-righteousness who claim they don't need God or faith or forgiveness.