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Acts: A church on fire

***Priorities***

Acts 5: 17-42

Whether you agree with President Trump or not, whether you think he is a positive influence on the world or a negative one, the one thing we can all agree on is that he continues to not just have an impact on the world order, but he turns it upside down. President Trump doesn’t simply fade into the background, he is front and centre, he is one of those very rare things today, a conviction politician who less interested in what people think and more interested in doing the things he believes needs to be done. (This is neither an endorsement of him nor a criticism of him, it is simply a description of who he is.)

As we pick up the story in Acts 5 the church in Jerusalem is continuing to have a similar effect on the city, the way things have always been done and the established order of things. The Apostles have been arrested again for preaching in the name of Jesus. You will remember they were arrested before and then released under the strict instructions to stop preaching Jesus.

As we read through the passage it isn’t just that they have been preaching about Jesus and his resurrection they have very clearly said that he was crucified because of the Jewish leaders, that he died because of their guilt. ***Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.***’ (Acts 5:28)

So often when we talk about Jesus, we talk in a way that highlights his goodness and even when we talk about his sacrifice we try to do it in such a way as to fall short of saying that Jesus blood is on our hands. That the only reason he died was because of our, because of my guilt before a holy God. When we start to talk about guilt, when we start to personalise the cross then people get offended, but the truth of the matter is the gospel is offensive, and we see that being worked here in this story.

Such was the offense taken by the Jewish leaders they had the apostles arrested and thrown in jail again. Even this was not enough to stop then from preaching Jesus, preaching the offense of the gospel because that night they experienced the first of a number of miraculous escapes from jail.

It seems the guards were unaware of what was happening because in a scene similar to the great escape where the prisoners of war are brought out for the roll call the next day everyone is shocked to discover the apostles were missing. But were as Steve McQueen the rest of the great escapees do all they can to evade capture and being recognised, the apostles returned to the temple courts and again preached Jesus.

Inevitably they were rearrested, and such was the anger among the Sanhedrin they wanted to put them to death, until a man called Gamaliel intervened. Incidentally he is the man Saul, who would become Paul, studied under. Gamaliel used his wisdom to warn the Sanhedrin if the apostles are of God they won’t stop the message they preach by killing them, but if they are not of God the message will fade and die of natural causes. Better to do nothing rather than oppose God.

The story ends with the apostles being flogged and released. They rejoice in their suffering, not because they are masochists, but because they know how much Jesus suffered for them, how much he gave them and so they are happy to have given something to him, to have suffered for the sake of his name.

This story is all about priorities.

* Prioritising Jesus over ourselves
* Prioritising God’s command over how things look
* Prioritising the truth over being offended.

1. The priority of the gospel

The apostles refused to let anyone silence the message of Jesus Christ. It didn’t matter to them if they were arrested, flogged or threatened with death. The important thing was that **Jesus** was preached. You and I are very unlikely to face prison for preaching Jesus.

We are much more likely to face a feeling of embarrassment, a fear of being mocked, or thought of as being out of step, old fashioned, maybe a bit weak or not intellectually able because our faith in Jesus flies in the face of modern science and enlightenment. The atheist belief in a godless universe is increasingly becoming the accepted world view.

Where is the priority in our lives? Is it to protect our reputation, to shield ourselves from mockery, to avoid embarrassment or is our priority the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do we understand the urgency of the message, the importance of people hearing? Have we forgotten the reason we proclaim this gospel is because one day God will bring the judgement that Jesus has borne for us on all who do not believe, who have rejected his gospel. There is an urgency in this message because we don’t know if Jesus is coming later today, next week, next year or in the next 1000 years.

The gospel takes priority because it is more important, more urgent that any embarrassment or unease we might feel.

1. Prioritising God’s command over how things look

Let’s be honest, we are easily discouraged. We don’t have to see to many knock backs for us to lose heart and give up. Knockbacks don’t come much bigger than being arrested and thrown in jail. Yet the apostles persevered in their preaching because they trusted the fact that it is God who causes his church to grow. Their role was to be faithful, regardless as to how successful they did or did not appear to be.

Let’s remember these are the same men who experienced the utter failure of seeing Jesus dead and buried. On that first Easter Saturday all hope was lost, the messiah was dead, the message, the crusade, the mission – it was over, a failure.

Until the incredible miracle of the resurrection on Easter Sunday. The apostles understood that defeat in God’s hands can be turned into an incredible victory and if Jesus can be resurrected from the dead, then the gospel can still be preached from prison, and it was.

We may not see the fruit of our labours, but that does not mean God is not at work. For the last few weeks now we have been praying that one person a week would come to faith. We might not be seeing the answer to that prayer right now, but does that mean God is not at work? We are to continue praying, continue telling people about Jesus, continue preaching, continue trusting God, in fact we are to continue to make these things a priority in our lives because that demonstrates our trust in God, that he will answer, that he will build his church, that he is not defeated, even if we are discouraged and so keep going, keep praying, keep preaching because we prioritise trusting God.

1. Practising truth over being offended.

I have stared to wonder if part of the reason we aren’t seeing people come to faith in Jesus, that we are struggling to see people coming to church (especially from among those who have little or no church connection) because we have taken the offense out of the gospel.

Have our churches and has our message become a bit bland and a bit safe because we will say things like Jesus loves you, which is very true, that God seeks to welcome you, which is very true. We don’t say things like we are guilty of the most grievous sins against God. We don’t make clear that because of our sin, we have the blood of Jesus on our hands. We don’t make clear the reason why we need to be saved, why Jesus died for us… everything is sanitised so as not to offend.

I will make a 999-emergency call because I recognise the danger I am in and that I need to be rescued. If don’t feel in danger, if I am unaware of the danger I won’t make that call. If I am swimming in the sea and am confident that I can make it back to the shore, I won’t wave and shout for the lifeguard.

If I am unaware of my need for salvation, will I call out to Jesus?

The apostles prioritised the full gospel, even if it offended some. Do we do the same? Is our reluctance because we haven’t really fully admitted our sin… will we only be able to prioritise the full offense of the gospel when we begin to experience that offense in our own lives by confessing and naming the sin we bear. Peter experienced this offense when he walked along that beach with Jesus and was asked three times do you love me. He was hurt, but he then understood how much Jesus had done for him, how much he needed Jesus.

What are our priorities?

* Prioritising Jesus over ourselves
* Prioritising God’s command over how things look
* Prioritising the truth over being offended.

This is the recipe for a church to turn it’s world upside down.