
Responding to Opposition

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 19th July

Psalm 2:1-8 Acts 4:23-37

Part 6 in Acts series



Our passage from Ch 4 Acts this morning is divided into two sections that I will head up

- Boldness and proclamation vs 23 to 31
- Putting our money where our mouth is, vs 32 to 36.

Let's pray, Lord Jesus, as you equipped and empowered your people in the early church. Work afresh in our hearts and minds that we might offer our lives in your service, and in the service of those around us, amen.

Let's briefly recap where we are in the text. Peter and John have been interrogated by the Sanhedrin. The very ones that engineered Jesus Crucifixion. They have ordered Peter and John to speak no more in the name of Jesus.

If John and Peter are not silenced, the religious leaders standing with the people, and their power over the people will be under threat. Remember at this stage, if we count women and children some 20,000 or more may well have responded to the Gospel. And we are not many days removed from Pentecost.

There is another threat also that the Sanhedrin face. Most of the Sanhedrin are appointed by, and answerable to, the Roman authorities. Anything, or anyone who upset the "Pax Romana." The peace of Rome, would face the consequences.

Be very sure that the Sanhedrin's treat against Peter and John needed to be taken very seriously. To ignore it could put them in mortal danger. What to do?

Vs 23-24. After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard it they raised their voices to God and said "sovereign Lord, who made the heavens and the Earth, the sea and everything in them."

Here we see a great example of how to respond in the face of opposition, be it spiritual, political, economic, whatever.

Firstly, to apply the principle in a general sense. Don't go through difficulties and challenges alone. Peter and John shared the problem with the other believers. Now specific to the situation at hand. It was absolutely appropriate Peter and John take the situation and the problem to the church at large.

You see if Peter and John were silenced, if Jesus is not proclaimed and taught, how will the body of believers grow and mature, either individually or numerically?

You will remember in ch 2 the first thing the Spirit filled believers devoted themselves to, following their turning to Christ, and being baptised, was to devote themselves to the Apostles teaching. Without a solid grounding and understanding, the other things on the list that the believers devoted themselves to are not going to be undertaken, as well as they might be with a good grounding and understanding.

The one who lay behind the efforts to close down the voice of the Gospel, was well aware that to do so will both stunt the growth of the believer, and sabotage the means that the unbeliever most usually comes to faith.

Secondly , and most of all. The believers could not deal with the threat in their own strength. As we work through Acts we are beginning to see the backlash of Satan. The enemy of souls is fighting back.

Scripture warns us, “we fight not against flesh and blood.” Our opponent is one not to be toyed with. In the situation at hand the enemy is working behind and through the Religious leaders.

Best the challenge not be underestimated. In chapter 5 the Apostles are tortured, for there is no other way to describe a flogging. In chapter 7 we have the first Christian martyr, Stephen.

In the face of opposition it's important to remember who's in control. It is the Sovereign Lord who made the heavens and the Earth. The Sanhedrin might think they are calling the shots. But God is sovereign, and the believers affirm that fact as they begin their prayer.

They continue. Vs 25-26 it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant, why did the Gentiles rage and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the Earth took their stand and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.

Vs 23-24, God is sovereign. And secondly, vs 25-26, opposition to the purposes of God was not a new problem.

The believers raised their voices to the sovereign God, remembering how faithful, ones like King David, viewed opposition, even powerful opposition. They then take that perspective and apply it the current context.

Vs 27-28, for in the city in fact both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel gathered together against your holy servant Jesus whom you appointed to do whatever your hand, and whatever your plan had predestined to take place

- Don't underestimate the challenge.
- Don't underestimate God.
- Don't focus on the problem.
- Do focus on the plans and purposes of God.

The political and religious powers thought they were in control. Not a bit of it. They were unknowingly, and rebelliously, carrying out the plans and purposes of God.

What of Satan the one who is fighting back and stirring up this opposition? As Jesus breathed his last on the cross, the enemy of souls must have, just for a second, thought he had won.

Until that is, the curtain of the Temple tore from the top to the bottom. At that moment the enemy realised the cross was nothing less than a doorway into the very holy of holies. The cross is nothing less than a door into the very presence of God.

Don't focus on the problem. Focus on the plans and purposes of God. Vs29-30, and now Lord, look at their threats, and keep us safe. Keep us from experiencing opposition. Make following you easy. Perish the thought that we would have to suffer in the way that Jesus suffered.

Of course that's not how they prayed, and yet the way we sometimes "market" following Jesus you would think that is the way they prayed. Not a bit of it. Vs 29, And now Lord, look at their threats, and grant your servants to speak your word with all boldness. While you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

In other words keep our mouths open, and keep working.

Their prayer is not that what is happening would stop. Exactly the opposite. Their prayer is that God would give boldness to the believers that they might continue to speak in the name of Jesus.

And their prayer is that God would continue working in and through the name of Jesus. What a great prayer. What a great result. Vs 31. When they had prayed the place in which they were gathered together was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

It was a bit like a mini Pentecost. It was a further filling of the Spirit to meet the situation at hand. It would be true to say we all need mini Pentecosts in our lives from time to time. "Be being filled" is the way the NT talks of the Spirits filling. It is a constant and ongoing thing.

As the believers pray, and as God answers, there is a wonderful irony in what happens. Wonderful from the perspective of the Gospel spreading. Ironic in respect the religious leaders attempt to shut things down.

Up to this stage Peter and John have been speaking boldly. The religious authorities try to silence them. What to do? Take the problem to the people of God, who then take it to the sovereign God. The problem for the religious leadership is about to grow exponentially.

Now it's not just going to be Peter and John speaking of Jesus. The community of faith has been freshly filled with the Spirit and they have all been emboldened to speak of Jesus.

And if we are tempted to think the early believers did not put their money where their mouth was, the account that finishes the chapter shows that belief and behaviour are closely linked.

Vs 32-35, now the whole group of these who believed were of one heart and soul and no one claimed private ownership of any positions but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the Apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. We have already looked at the circumstances of the early church when we read about how the believers were sharing their positions in chapter 2.

We saw how potentially thousands of new and out of town converts were having to be looked after by the local believers in Jerusalem. That's because a good number of the out of town converts, stayed in Jerusalem to devote themselves to the apostles teaching to fellowship to the breaking of bread and the prayer.

Thousands more, this time probably locals, are converted to Jesus as Peter preaches following the healing of the lame man. Now it's not just possessions that are listed as being held in common, and sold as needed. Now it's lands and houses as well. These are indeed extra extraordinary times and extraordinarily times call for extraordinary generosity.

Let's talk generally. There are various scriptural warnings and instructions around money and material positions. One example from Jesus. "Where our treasure is there our heart will be also." It's true to say that how we view and utilise what we have can be a real demonstration of our values, our faith, our commitment. .

We need to be balanced though. On the one hand we are called to be trusting towards God and generous towards others On the other we are called to be responsible and prudent. Take care of our families. Pay our taxes. Work that we might not be a burden to others, even contributing to the needs of others if we are able.

Interestingly, and maybe instructionally, if we read through the rest of the book of Acts, and some other NT letters, it appears that the Jerusalem church went

on to become something of a financial burden on the church at large. Collections were taken on an ongoing basis for the Jerusalem church.

Is that because the church had been too generous? Is it because they didn't in wise a way made make provision for the future? We simply don't know. When does a good thing become an unhelpful thing? How long is a piece of string?

It would seem to me that, when it comes to our freedom, and responsibility, in regards material positions, we need both faith and wisdom.

- We need to be willing to hear and obey, whatever the cost.
- We need also make sure we are hearing aright and with discernment.

I've heard some shockingly manipulative things said prior to the collection over the years. I've heard encouragements to give that appeal not so much to our faith and trust in God. But to the idea that we give in order to get back.

A good question to ask is this. Are we being encouraged to give because we want to contribute to the mission of the church and the proclamation of the Gospel?

Or are we being encouraged to give because we see the church leader living very well. Flash house. Flash cars. A Harley Davison. We hear the church leader talk endlessly about how God has blessed them and they equate God's blessing with material wealth. Which by the way is a very OT way of showing God's blessing prior to the coming of Christ.

It is true we never lose by giving to God. It is true that God loves to bless his people. But our motivations are important. And what if God chooses to bless us in a way that is different than we expect, and as advertised.

It very much opens the way to manipulation, and let me call it for what it is, spiritual abuse, when a church leader equates wealth with God's blessing and effectively teaches, if you give generously, you'll be as blessed as I am.

The question needs to be asked who is actually blessing the church leader. God, or the people who very often cannot afford to give to the extent that they do?

To rap up. What do we see in our passage today.

How best to deal with opposition, or let me add problems in general. Don't deal with them alone, and take them to God.

A far as our Sharing the Gospel, we can pray that God will give us boldness, and that he will make opportunity for us to share as God works.

As far as putting our money where our mouth is. What we see in acts was “a model,” not necessarily “the model.” We give freely and not under compulsion. We do it for the privilege of sharing in the mission of God and the proclamation of the Gospel in both Word and deed. That’s the NT model.

- Are our mouths at God’s disposal?
- Are our material assets at God's disposal?
- People need to hear the message.
- And people need to see the message.

Let’s pray, Lord Jesus, we thank you for your Word and the example set by the early church. Open our mouths, give us boldness and work by your Holy Spirit we pray, amen.