

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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Sunday 23rd August 2020 – “What is the Church?” (4) – “Proclamation”

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

What is the Church?

That’s the question we’ve been asking in these recent weeks, a question prompted by the fact that we’ve been out of our church buildings for such a long period of time. This has led many church leaders to tell us that, if there is a time to really start thinking about what the Church means to us, then this would be the ideal moment.

With the normal pattern of things being temporarily abandoned it would be, we are told, good to start taking stock, and to start reflecting on how things will be when we get back in our church buildings again.

Until that happens – and hopefully we’re heading in the right direction for opening our doors, even in a limited way, in the not too distant future – we continue to reflect on what it means to be God’s people.

This week, our theme is taken from verse 4 of CH4 number 204, the hymn *“I am the church”* where we read, *“At Pentecost some people received the Holy Spirit and told the good news throughout the world to all who would hear it”*.

The Church is, we will be thinking about today, *“Proclamation”* and *“Witnessing”*.

But more of that in a moment, however. Shall we, first of all, pray?

Let us pray...

Opening prayer and Lord’s Prayer

Living God, through all of our days you journey with us. In those moments when the challenges of life threaten to overwhelm us you are there as the steadying hand. In those days when we are filled with joy you are there at our sides smiling and laughing with us. When we are uncertain about the direction or the turn we should take you are the guiding light, the sound of affirmation, the touch of reassurance.

We thank you for the tenderness of your care for us and for your knowledge of us.

We do not understand the way in which you understand us. We cannot comprehend the depths of your love nor of your being. And yet we know that we are known, known better and more profoundly than we even know ourselves.

And it is this which, this day, draws us to pause for these moments so that we can worship you... pausing the daily routine of life to begin to know again that we are known... and loved... and to be reassured by knowing that.

We confess that we often allow the busyness of our days to overwhelm us or to divert our thoughts from that which is important.

We become enmeshed in the details of our daily existence and fail to see the bigger picture.

And we confess that, when you call us to pause for a moment in contemplation, that our minds continue to race... pausing our movements but failing to still our minds.

So, we come to you this day not only to seek forgiveness but to centre ourselves back on you.

Receive our worship, we pray and help us as we worship to keep our gaze on you the one who knows us and loves us and reassures us.

Hear us therefore as we bring these our prayers in the words which Jesus has taught us to say in the Lord's prayer:

Our Father

who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen.

Bible Reading – Acts chapter 4 verses 1 to 22

Our reading today comes from the book of Acts chapter 4 verses 1 to 22. It will be read for us today by Alastair Sutherland.

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.

Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of His Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

Thank you to Alastair for sharing that reading with us.

I remember it well. I was a student at New College, training for the ministry and a group of students (myself included) decided that it was about time that the folk of Edinburgh heard something about the gospel. The plan was to head down to Princes Street and do a bit of street evangelism. So, we carried a flip chart down the mound and found a suitable place to pitch our so called "site". One of my fellow students started to deliver the talk... he was good... animated and enthusiastic... funny... and as he talked, he would paint things on the flip chart... I can't remember what he said except that there was a fair crowd around us by the time he finished... shoppers lugging their carrier bags on their way to catch a bus.

My friend's talk always finished with him telling the audience about the cross of Jesus Christ. Our job was to simply mingle. We weren't allowed to stand and stare at the folks who'd stopped to listen. Our job was to mingle and when the talk was over, and the painting on the flip chart had finished, was to turn to the person nearest us and ask them what they thought of what they had just heard.

I can't honestly say it was the most successful outing in the world. Some folk shrugged their shoulders. Others simply turned away ready to continue their walk to the bus and we consoled ourselves with the assurance that perhaps we had planted a few seeds. Maybe some of what we said would sink in with someone who had stopped to listen.

That was in the late 1980's and when I told my own minister back in my home church what we'd done, he laughed.

You see, several years before we made our way to Princes Street to do a bit of street evangelism he too had been involved, as a New College student too, in a similar outing and

he too had stopped someone on the same street as I had except, this time, he got more than he bargained for.

The busy shopper told him about a particularly harrowing episode in their life. It wasn't, he conceded, the best place to stop and talk about these sorts of experiences. A busy street full of busy people and eager students hoping for a quick response made him, he said, feel quite out of his depth. This was one subject and practice that was not on the University course! That was therefore the end, he said, of his foray into street evangelism though not the end of his enthusiasm for sharing the gospel which would have to find a different way to be communicated.

Not that anybody had explained this to the Apostle Peter, who is at the heart of our Bible reading from Acts chapter 4 and verses 1 to 22, which Alastair has just read for us. In reality, Peter has no other way of reaching the people than simply standing up in the open air and sharing the gospel message.

He can't, after all, invite people into a church building... a large hall or a mission tent at an evangelistic rally. The only option he has got is to say what he wants to say right there and then. And that is how, the book of Acts tells us, the Apostles started to grow the early Church with our reading, at verse 5, telling us that by this point – still in the aftermath of Pentecost itself – that the Church had grown to 5 thousand men which, as one commentator points out is a significant enough figure but would be even more significant if Luke, the author of Acts, had told us how many woman and children had also come to faith in those early days.

Slice and dice it however you like, though, the figure was large and was built upon the willingness of the Apostles to basically stand up where they were and share their faith with others.

Not that, on this occasion, everything went quite according to plan for Peter and his companion John because, as our reading opens today, we discover them being arrested by the Temple authorities.

Why were they arrested? Well, there are two basic reasons.

The first reason is because of the events recounted in Acts chapter 3. There we read the wonderful story of Peter and John making their way to the Temple when they came across a lame man sitting at what was called the "*beautiful gate*". The man had been lame all his days and was wholly reliant on handouts from others. This was why he had become such a fixture at the entrance to the temple... a reminder to the worshippers of their obligations to the poor.

As they pass him by this man also asks Peter and John for help. But they have no money. Being an apostle was not a lucrative business. That's when Peter utters those famous words, enshrined in that wonderful children's chorus, "*Silver and Gold I do not have but what I have I give to you – in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Walk!*"

And so, the lame man walks again... and because he now walks the religious authorities are becoming agitated because every time these followers of Jesus do something like this they end up with even more followers than they had before.

That was one reason, and it was one of the things that, as they challenged Peter and John, that they speak about.

At verse 7 of our reading they basically ask them how on earth they do this sort of thing? How did they manage to heal this man? By what authority did they do this?

The other reason they are arrested is, of course, because of what we find at verse 2 of our reading which is worth hearing again – *“They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the Resurrection of the dead”*.

The very thought of it was abhorrent to the religious leaders at the Temple. This teaching ran counter to everything they believed and everything they taught others. It simply couldn't happen this way, at least not according to their way of looking at things.

Peter and John (and their like) had to be stopped. Not only were they doing things that could not be explained but they were also teaching things – according to them – that could not be justified.

Their response is a perfect example of what one of my former professors at New College used to say that it was amazing how many disagreements about what to believe and what not to believe ended up becoming disagreements about who had the right to say something and who should just stay quiet.

When the arguments are over one side simply says to the other, *“anyway – who put you in charge? Who allowed you to decide? You don't have the authority to declare anything on this matter...”*

Those are the sort of words uttered by the side which believes the cards are stacked in their favour, like the religious authorities who were used to the people following them and not the other way around.

Not that, to get back to Peter again, he made things exactly easy for these religious leaders. In some sense his words to them were so stark... so unswerving that it was little wonder that they came straight back to him with a demand that he ceased his speaking with immediate effect... with the warning that he had no right to say what he was saying and that he was breaking some unalterable rule if he continued to speak out as he does.

More to the point, as one commentator notes, Peter was not exactly a classic example of consistency when it came to witnessing for Jesus. After all, was it not Peter who at Luke chapter 22 had denied to the servant girl who pointed him out as a follower of Jesus, that he even knew who Jesus was, declaring *“Woman, I don't know him!”*

As that commentator writes, *“I sometimes wonder if even his companion, John, didn't blink his eyes or try to clear his ears to make sure it was Peter who was speaking!”*.

Peter was not, as I said, an unwavering witness to the gospel. The question here, however, is, as that commentator goes on to say, not so much as to WHAT had gotten into Peter's mind that made him change his ways but rather WHO had gotten into Peter's heart.

What had happened in between the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus and this bruising encounter at Acts chapter 4 where Peter talks about Jesus Christ as freely as a budgie sits in its cage chattering away?

That's right...! Pentecost has happened...! The Holy Spirit has happened and with the arrival of the Holy Spirit a whole lot of tongue-tied disciples were now freely speaking Apostles.

And that same Holy Spirit would give them the words to say even when they stood in front of those who would persecute them or tell them to be quiet.

This was exactly what Jesus said would happen to them at Luke 12 and verses 11 and 12 when he says these words: *“When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities*

do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say”.

Which is exactly what, I venture to suggest, Jesus might say to each one of us when we ponder whether to speak of our faith to another or whether to stay quiet. There is a time, perhaps, for both.

Some of the boldest statements and ways to witness come in the simplicity of our actions, just by being who we are. There are times, however, when a word or two might just be appropriate. And, if so, we do not need to fill those words with complicated ideas...

It may not be for us to do as Peter did and boldly stand in the open air and proclaim the word of God. But we each have our own story to tell of how Jesus has changed our lives and perhaps - with the Holy Spirits prompting - that will help us to find the right words to utter and the right place to say them.

Let us pray.

Closing Prayer

Lord of all, you have called us to be witnesses to Jesus Christ, to tell others what he has done for us.

Teach us to always speak from our own experience rather than to recount someone else's story, to share what Christ means to us rather than what he means to others who have their own story to tell.

Teach us to be conscious of those to whom we are talking, taking the care to shape our words to the people we meet and to the story of their lives.

Teach us to present a gospel that is focussed rather than getting bogged down in detail and ideas that are hard to comprehend and relate to.

Teach us to witness wherever the opportunity presents itself so that we might proclaim your love through word, action and compassion.

May we be a people who carry the good news with them.

Bless all who are in need of good news and reassurance this day. And, if it be what you want of us, help us to be part of the good news that they need to hear.

And so, may all people everywhere come to meet you and know you for themselves for it is in the name of Christ that we pray. Amen.

Benediction

Go now to proclaim the gospel - not just in words but in actions, through not just what is said but in who you are.

May others, as they meet you, also meet Christ and know his living presence for themselves.

And may the blessing of almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with you and all you love this day and forevermore, Amen.