

Sermon Given by

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### Acts 5:17-26 - "Jail break"

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The well known Christian doctor and writer, James Dobson, once reported a fascinating experiment which was conducted a few years ago to study the effect of peer pressure on teenagers. The participants were told that their eyesight was being tested. With a display board featuring three lines of different length, they were supposed to point to the longest line. The researchers gave the instructions: we will point to each line in turn – simply raise your hand when we point to the longest line. However 9 of the ten participants had been told secretly in advance that they should in fact vote each time for the second longest line. What would the tenth do? You can imagine what happens. The researchers began pointing at the three lines in turn – the third line was clearly the longest, but nine hands went straight up when a finger pointed at the second line. The tenth student was filled with doubt – had he heard the instructions right – he certainly didn't want everyone else to think he was an idiot – and so slowly he raised his hand along with them. And he wasn't alone: James Dobson reported that in other examples of the same study 75% of young people tested behaved in the same way. They preferred to say that a short line was longer than a long line, rather than stand out from the crowd. It was more important to fit in than to be right. And that is not a temptation which affects only teenagers. It's surely true for all of us that no matter how strong our convictions, being in the minority seriously erodes them, doesn't it? When it comes to the Christian faith, it's a case in point. You and I live in a society where 99% of those around us would put their hands up to very different conclusions about the Lord Jesus Christ than we would; and in such an environment it is very easy for our confidence to be shaken. Even if we are intellectually convinced of the truth, we may still be silenced by the confident way other people voice views which contradict us – and we certainly don't want to be thought fools.

Strikingly the Christians in Acts 5 were faced with a not-dissimilar situation. They were in a small minority of people who were absolutely persuaded that Jesus was God's anointed Messiah, for the Jewish people and for the whole world: yes he had been crucified and rejected, by the Jews of all people. But God had shown how wrong that was by raising Jesus from the dead, and exalting him to the throne of heaven. And that, in turn, was not in doubt, because Jesus had now sent the Holy Spirit to the young Christian church – and the church was now doing precisely the sort of amazing things that Jesus had done in his lifetime: healing a man over forty years old who had been lame since birth. And there were other events which we have been looking at in recent weeks: a chilling episode of judgment where two people had dropped stone dead under the judgment of God and more healing miracles and exorcisms. Everyone should have been able to tell which was the longest line on the board. The Jewish authorities hadn't got rid of Jesus: he was clearly still at work. How would people vote on Jesus Christ is the question we are being faced with in this section of Acts. Where we left it last week, more and more people are coming to the conclusion that the Christian movement is genuine – crowds are gathering from the towns around Jerusalem, in verse 16 – so the ripples outward are spreading.

***Will the majority – led by the religious leaders – have the honesty to admit that they were wrong about Jesus? Or will they carry on trying to force everyone to conform, to lift up their hands with them? And will the Christians still have the courage to proclaim what they know to be true, even when the majority are against them?***

Those are the questions which our passage raises – and they are questions presumably which everyone of us can relate to. Are we happy –even as religious people - to go along with the crowd and seek to marginalise Jesus Christ and silence outspoken Christians? Or will we stand with Christ and with the truth, even if it is unpopular? What makes it harder for us is that we have as a culture enjoyed a degree of acceptance and popularity as Christians, and we are not used to being opposed or to having the tide turn against us. But to have society's support is abnormal – and there may have been a price for it, in terms of our courage to stand up for the truth being eroded.

There is a story of one of the early Salvation Army Majors, Allister Smith commenting on the persecution the Salvationists had faced at the start. The world through bricks at us then,' he said, now they throw bouquets.' Then he added: 'I sometimes think that the bouquets do us more harm than ever the bricks did. Well – we are moving from a season of bouquets, when Christianity was apparently acceptable to British society to a season of bricks. Perhaps the bouquets have done us ore harm than we can really tell: with generations of people in England thinking they were Christians when in fact they weren't. And they have never really faced the challenge to stand up courageously for their beliefs, in a minority. To raise their hands, if necessary alone, for Jesus Christ.

Well, our passage has some very relevant things to say to us. It gives us two polarised positions: Opposition or obedience: which is it going to be.

Let's look first at the Opposition and I want to call this heading unreasoning opposition - because notice straight away as I read verses 17 and 18 what is the motivation behind it: *<sup>17</sup>Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. <sup>18</sup>They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.* The stakes are being raised here, because this time, it seems that not just Peter and John are arrested but all twelve apostles. And what is it that has occasioned the clamp-down? Has new evidence come to light which demonstrates that Jesus isn't alive? On the contrary, the continuing miracles make it clear that Jesus is still at work. The only thing motivating them is jealousy that the numbers and the influence of Christians are growing. It never enters their heads to consider that they might be wrong. This is unreasoning opposition...

And the same thing happens as you read on from verse 19 *<sup>19</sup>But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. <sup>20</sup>"Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life." <sup>21</sup>At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.*

If this were being shown on reality tv, it is crying out for a split screen at this point. where you have two or more lots of actions running at the same time. There is lots of activity in the morning in lots of different locations. One camera needs to focus on the temple courts. Because God has been at work dramatically, sending an angel to release the apostles from the prison and at first light they had back to the temple – ie exactly the place of maximum hostility... and do exactly what they had been told before not to do by the religious

authorities.. Meanwhile another camera focuses on the meeting of the Sanhedrin. Verse 21 continues: *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.* The high priest and leaders are feeling rather smug – they think this time that with all twelve apostles behind bars they have the chance to snuff out this troublesome movement at last. And people are coming from all over to the meeting, the Sanhedrin members are all being recalled from holiday homes. Talk about a sledge-hammer being used to crack a nut: this is like recalling the House of Commons from their summer recess; the full force of the religious establishment squaring up to the tiny church. Everyone's giving each other high fives as they arrive for this important demonstration of justice – and all the time we can see on the split screen, the apostles busy preaching. Surely we are meant to chuckle when we read that the council sent to the jail for the apostles. Then another screen tells us what is happening in the prison. <sup>22</sup>*But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported,* <sup>23</sup>*"We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside."* Major embarrassment in the prison: the doors are locked securely, but no-one has bothered to check if there's anyone in the cells. So the guards have obviously missed everything – the angel who opened the doors and re-locked them must have administered some knock-out sedative to them. That all gets reported back to the Sanhedrin – let's leave the camera in the prison and look back at the reaction in the Council meeting, in verse 24 <sup>24</sup>*On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this.* A little hint that they know they are up against something supernatural – and while everyone's jaws are still on the floor someone rushes in completely out of breath and blurts out what we already know. <sup>25</sup>*Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people."* So what is going to happen now. Will the Sanhedrin admit that they are up against a bigger force than they can fight? Not a bit of it – because their opposition is unreasoning opposition. <sup>26</sup>*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.* That reminds me of the same anxiety which the authorities had faced when it came to arresting Jesus during the Passover – ooh dear, they had said, we want him arrested, but not during the feast or people will riot. But it's evidence of their dishonesty again. They are incapable of acting with integrity: if they arrest the apostles it is out of jealousy, not a concern for truth; if they don't arrest them forcibly does that mean they have become convinced that the apostles are right and deserve better treatment than they have given them – no it is just fear.

So this is unreasoning opposition. And today the same is so often seen where people will not become Christians, even though, if they are honest, the evidence confronting them is overwhelming. 'Convince a man against his will – he's of the same opinion still' – particularly if to side with the truth will mean stepping out of line with the majority – or at least a break with the company of those whose opinion matters a little too much and whose favour can't be lost. So the hands go up to say the shorter line is the longer one. What a breakthrough it is when someone has the moral and intellectual courage to think for themselves and join a group where they can think honestly about the claims of Christ – or in context of Muslim misinformation and massive pressure to conform about the Christian faith to go online and

find out from a website like the Maarifa website what the Bible actually teaches – and for that matter what Islam actually teaches.

Which leads me on therefore to the other possible response to God's enthronement of the Christ – it's either opposition or obedience. The theme of obedience has been running in our chapters for a while – so when Peter and John were commanded not to speak or teach preach at all in the name of Jesus in chapter 4 they replied in verse 19 *Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.* And we will see that sentiment again next week. But there is a beautiful example of the obedience of the apostles here in our passage if we look at chapter 5 verse 19-21 again <sup>19</sup>*But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out.* <sup>20</sup>*"Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."* <sup>21</sup>*At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.* They are told to Go and at daybreak they go, with no time off to recover from a night behind bars or for a slap up breakfast. They are told **where** to go – and that is exactly where they go, as they had been told, says verse 21: into the very stronghold of the enemy – in obedience to a God who describes himself as holding our his hands all day long to his stubborn, unbelieving people. Even at this stage he longs for them to turn back from the edge of disaster, and so that is what the apostles must do. And what a commission: 'tell the people the full message of this new life': it's a wonderful message that in the one who has been raised from the dead there is a resurrection life for all who follow him – a fresh start. What a lesson in prompt, detailed obedience –and specifically obedience in this whole matter of speaking and teaching people in season and out of season, whether it's convenient or inconvenient for the speakers or the listeners.

The story is told of the great General Wellington turned up on one occasion at a missions rally. Clergyman who was there was surprised to see him. 'My Lord, do you believe in missions?', he asked 'Well what are your marching orders?' asked the great military leader. The Clergyman replied that the Bible does say to make disciples of all nations. 'Well there is nothing more to say, is there?' retorted Wellington: 'Soldier you are to obey orders...' And we are to obey orders even when to do so means breaking ranks with an increasingly godless, anti-Christ society, where there is a conspiracy people refuse to face the truth claims of Christianity.

So the challenge comes back to us this morning – faced with the reality of the Risen and Reigning Lord Jesus Christ, which will it be: unreasoning opposition or unquestioning obedience? If we choose obedience to Jesus rather than opposition to him, we will have the same reassurance as the early Christians enjoyed: whatever the opposition, Jesus is on the throne and we are safe and wise to side with him.

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)