

Sermon Given by

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Acts 5:27-42 - "Who's the boss here?"

One of the things which I enjoy doing on family holidays is to play lots of games of cards, and in particular whist and bridge. It doesn't matter where we are, whether we're in a restaurant or on a ferry or anywhere else, we regularly get out the cards and have a quick game. I don't know if you are a card player, but there is a great moment in a game of cards when your opponent plays the ace of spades with a gloriously smug expression. He just assumes that he is going to win the hand. But unknown to him you don't have any spades, which means that you are free to play a trump – any trump will do, even the two, and it's you this time who has to hide the smug expression as you trump his hand and win all the points. And that image came to my mind as I read through Acts chapter 5. Perhaps it's not immediately obvious, but it seems to be that there is a hidden battle going on in the book of Acts. Satan rarely makes an overt appearance, but it is quite clear that he is doing all that he can to stop the spread of the gospel. You may remember back in Chapter 1 + 2 the Lord Jesus ascends to heaven and sends his Holy Spirit to his people so that they might take the gospel to the ends of the earth. But every step of the way the devil is doing all he can to stop that gospel progress. I guess if we could see him he would probably have a smug expression on his face as he lays down on the table what he thinks is the ace of spades, and thinks that it is bound to stop the gospel progress, God must be beaten now, but time after time God trumps whatever the devil plays because he is committed to the growth of his church. And we can certainly see that in Acts chapter 5. There is opposition to the gospel proclamation, but it is trumped by God. There are 3 examples of it in this chapter, with Miraculous Intervention in v17-26, Christian Conviction in v27-32 and non-Christian support in v33-40, and we'll have a look at each of them in turn.

Miraculous Intervention (v17-26):

Looking back to last week, you will remember if you were here, that in v17 the high priests were furious at the apostles for continuing to preach the gospel. They responded by rounding the apostles up and putting them in the public jail. Now that's a pretty serious moment for the whole Christian movement, because in those early years pretty much everything under God depended on the apostles. It was the apostles chiefly who preached and spread the good news about Jesus Christ to all who would listen, and more than that it was the apostles who performed the miracles. So if the apostles have been captured and taken away then the whole Christian movement is under threat. The High priest knew that, and that is why he arrested them. But just as things look bad we saw how God played his first trump card, v19 *"But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out"*. An angel. There was a miraculous intervention to allow the gospel to continue to spread. And it worked. The apostles were freed and continued to preach the gospel. So the next morning when the priests arrived to examine the apostles they couldn't find them in the jail. Then in v25, *"Someone came and said, Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people."* The very thing the high priest wanted to stop the angel ensured continued to happen.

We see that God is completely in control, he played the trump card of miraculous intervention, and the wonderful truth is that the God who did that miracle all those years ago has not changed. He is the same God today. He can do whatever he wants to ensure that the gospel continues to spread. Nowadays he doesn't perform these miraculous intervention's on the same scale, but he is able to if he wants to. The key point is that he is determined to ensure that the gospel continues to progress, and will use whatever means he wants to ensure that aim is achieved.

Christian Conviction (v27-32):

But despite this miraculous intervention to free the apostles the high priest and the other religious leaders don't give up, and once more the apostles are arrested, and are taken before the Sanhedrian. The high priest addresses them, v28 *"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."* Now imagine yourself in the shoes of the apostles, and remember these are not super human super heroes. These are ordinary human beings who weeks earlier, in the time before Jesus had risen from the dead were petrified, thinking that the next knock on the door would be to take them away to crucify them. And here they are, now in front of the very Sanhedrian who weeks earlier handed the Lord Jesus over to Pilate to be crucified. They must have realised that their lives were on the line. And it must have been tempting to buckle, tempting no doubt to accept to be quiet from now on so that they would be released, but v29, *"Peter and the other apostles replied – we must obey God rather than men"*.

Again we see that the Devil hasn't won – he's trumped this time not so much by miraculous intervention, as by Christian conviction – the apostles were so convinced of the gospel that they couldn't keep quiet despite the threats they received. They go on to explain to the high priests the reasons for their convictions, all of which concern what God has done in history. V30, *"The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead – whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree."* Quite a bold thing to say to these leaders, isn't it. You killed him, but God raised him. The resurrection made it clear that what those religious leaders did by handing Jesus over to Pilate to be killed was a horrible mistake. They assumed that Jesus was an imposter, but God vindicated him by raising him from the dead, and that made it crystal clear to the apostles that God was on the side of the Lord Jesus Christ, and not on the side of his persecutors. They had a clear choice, either obey human authority, which had the power to arrest and even execute them, or else stick with Jesus and continue to obey him. The resurrection made it clear what they should do – it showed them that Jesus was on God's side as God proclaimed king. That's what Peter goes on to speak about, v31, *"God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel."* So the resurrection shows that Jesus isn't an imposter, but the Prince and Saviour, he is the promised King who would save his people, and offers repentance and forgiveness to anyone who would accept him. And we know that this is true because Jesus rose from the dead which shows us that his death achieved what he said it would. So the challenge for the High Priest and for those of us who don't already trust in Jesus is will we accept Jesus as our Price and Saviour? Because that is who he is. The apostles were human witnesses of this. They saw Jesus with their own eyes and heard him with their own ears, but more than that there is also the witness of the Holy Spirit, v32, *"We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."*

The gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was a great declaration from God that he really is the Christ, how else could this great gift of the Holy Spirit be given, if it wasn't from the Christ. History proves these things. God has raised Jesus from the dead, God exalted Jesus as Saviour, God sent the Holy Spirit to his people, and those convictions were so deeply embedded in the apostles that nothing would stop them proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ, whatever the circumstances. And along the years many Christians have been armed with the same convictions – what is it that keeps our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world going in the face of terrible opposition? And what keeps them living and speaking for Christ? It's conviction, isn't it – they really believe their beliefs. That what's kept many in our own country going, even in hard times of opposition – for example Reformers burnt at the stake, they had a choice, either to go with what the church authorities was saying that the bread and wine actually became the body and blood of Christ in Communion, or they could believe what the bible said that there has only been one sacrifice which has been offered up once for all when Jesus died, and they chose to believe what the bible said and so were burnt for their conviction. It's conviction that does it.

At the moment here in England we have relatively easy lives compared to what the apostles faced. Yet even in the face of slight opposition, such as colleagues making fun of that fact that we are Christians, it is so easy for us to give up sharing the good news about Jesus. Or how about all the apathy which is so common in our society, for example many of my friends at university just couldn't be bothered to think about Christianity as they felt they had better things to do with their time. How are we going to respond? Are we just going to give up living and speaking for Christ? The challenge from this passage is to continue to speak about Christ, even when it's hard work and we don't feel like it. And what's going to keep us going is having the same convictions that the apostles had - that God really has raised Jesus from the dead and has exalted him as Prince and Saviour and that people need to hear about him. So I think it's important for us is to make sure that we are deeply rooted in Christian truths, as that is what is going to keep us talking about Jesus during hard times.

Non-Christian Support (v33-40):

The 3rd and final trump card is non-Christian support, and we're thinking now about the ally, which is Gamaliel, v33-40. Again the opponents still don't admit defeat, so once more this little section begins with opposition. When they hear the speech of Peter and the other apostles the chief priests are furious and want to put them to death. It's a serious moment, they could have done it, they did it with Jesus, but God counters with a surprising trump card. He brings into action a non-Christian, Gamaliel, and his speech actually saves the apostles' lives. He's introduced in v34 – we read that he is Pharisee who is honoured by all. He urges caution on the basis of history. He talks about Theudas and Judas, both of whom were leaders of movements, but both of them had been killed and very quickly the followers began to disperse and the whole movement was soon forgot. He concludes the history lesson in v38 by saying *“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. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”* It's a powerful argument and it wins the day. So, v40, *“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.”*

So off they go, but it's not long before they are speaking about Jesus again. v42 *"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 Christ."* Isn't it wonderful how God has yet again played the trump card, this time of non-Christian support, and it achieved the aim of allowing the gospel to continue to spread. And it's ironic how it isn't just any non-Christian support that God uses, but infact someone from within the very group who was trying to crush the spread of the gospel!

Even today God uses this surprising trump card of non-Christian support. I think of Billy Graham. Billy Graham has preached to many more people in history than anyone else, and it really began in 1949 in LA or atleast his fame began then as some churches invited him to give some talks. The tent was filled night by night, and so they continued for a second week, after which they were debating whether to stop the crusade then. At that point William Hurst who was the Rupert Murdoch of the day, heard about Billy Graham and he was impressed by this young man. He wasn't a Christian, but as he was impressed by Billy Graham he said 2 words to his newspapers – Puff Billy – in other words make a big deal about Billy, and that night the tent was packed with photographers and the next day the newspapers were packed with headline. Soon afterwards around the whole nation people were talking about Billy Graham, and wherever he went he was already a household name, and he has had a great impact on many. Praise God for that one decision by a non-Christian and his 2 worded instruction – Puff Billy – God can use anyone, even non-Christians, to achieve the spread of the gospel. So thanks to these trump cards of Miraculous Intervention, Christian convictions and non-Christian support the apostles are freed, and respond in v41 *"Rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."* Isn't that a wonderful example for us, I don't know what wounds we are nursing at the moment. It's tough, even in comfortable Britian witnessing to the Lord Jesus, it's tough for example when we invite someone to an evangelistic event, or invite them to church and they say no for no good reason. And these relatively minor bruises we can nurse and look at for weeks, so that we don't summon up the courage to say anything else to anyone for a little while longer. Yet here are guys who were in real danger of loosing their lives, they had just been in jail and knew that many in the Sanhedrian wanted them killed. But what do they do as soon as they are released. They rejoice because they were counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the gospel. I like the story of General Booth who founded the Salvation Army. On one occasion as he was preaching he was spat on. One of his army officers got out his handkerchief and was about to wipe off the spit from his tunic, but Booth said don't wipe it away, it's a badge. It might seem a strange thing to say, but the point is that our wounds in the name of Christ aren't to be wiped away, but we should consider them a privilege.

And did you notice what the apostles did after rejoicing for the privilege of suffering for the gospel, v42, *'they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.'* It's a wonderful conclusion. It just shows that despite Satan's best efforts of stopping the spread of the gospel they haven't worked. God is in control, nothing can stop the cause of the gospel. And this isn't just an isolated event, but there have many been times in history when God has played his trump cards, and the result is the spread of the gospel.

For example look at South Korea. In 1900 South Korea had no Protestant church and it was thought to be "impossible to penetrate." Yet God is at work and today South Korea is 30% Christian with 4,000 churches in Seoul alone. Or how about the Arab world? You may remember some of the stats we saw during the service last Sunday. Things like there are 7 people on average becoming Christians each day in Algeria, or in Iraq where there are 46 new churches since 2003. God is at work and is achieving his plan of spreading the gospel. And it is vital that we remember this wonderful truth that God is in control and is determined to ensure the spread of his gospel. Maybe that is a message that you particularly need to hear at the moment. Perhaps you have recently been knocked back, maybe with a friend getting annoyed at you for sharing the good news about Jesus with them, and so are naturally tempted to give up talking about Jesus now.

We need to remember who God is and focus on him rather than the opposition – He is the unchanging, eternal God, who defends and preserves his messengers and enables them to go on proclaiming his message. He is the God who raised Jesus and exalted him as leader and saviour, who gives His Holy Spirit to all who trust and obey him. He's the God whose sovereignty means we stand not a 0.1% chance of being able to overthrow the slightest of his purposes. He is the God who enables his followers to go on every day talking about Jesus. And he's our God – and he's with us this week, as we go back to that office, that school, that neighbourhood, where ever it is that God has called us live. We need to remember that as we try and share this glorious gospel with those around us. God is in control, and nothing and no-one will be able to overthrow God's plan for the spread of his gospel, so let's be bold in telling people about Jesus and be confident that God is in control. But if this talk of sharing the gospel sounds alien to us then it is worth asking ourselves why it was such a big deal for the apostles. Such a big deal that they were willing to put their lives on the line for it. They must have really believed in it and believed that others needed to hear the good news about Jesus. So can I encourage us all to be bold in talking about Jesus even this week, and be confident that he is in control and is committed to the spread of his gospel.

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.)