

We are continuing to look at different aspects of the teachings in the Acts of the Apostles; Sue spoke of the work of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and how the early church began to evolve; David spoke of the challenges to the early church, comparing it to a spiritual battlefield which continues to this day; last week Jane spoke of the way the early church members shared life together and how we might make sense of the shocking and dramatic story of Ananias and Sapphira.

Today's reading continues immediately on from that story and I want to look in detail at three verses and you might find it helpful to have your pew bible open at page 119:

I shall be looking at:

verse 12 where we read of many signs and wonders being done by the apostles

verses 19 where an Angel frees the apostles from jail

verse 20 where the Angel instructs the apostles

VERSE 12

“Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were altogether in Solomon's Portico”

Last week we heard that a great fear had come over the church after the sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, yet the apostles seem to have continued their work with greater enthusiasm than before, and with marked success.

An act of ultimate severity on two individuals is instantly followed by acts of clemency and mercy upon many others; the former severity was necessary to prevent the intrusion of hypocrites into the fledgling Church whereas the subsequent acts were equally necessary for the continued spreading of the good news and inviting people to join them in and through the love of Christ.

We are not talking of just the odd healing now and again, but *many*; indeed we are told great numbers gathered from not only Jerusalem but outlying villages and towns too.

The fact that so many people were being cured was clearly showing a new reality; the power of a living God was working in the lives of ordinary people, not at some time in the future as promised but in the here and now.

For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, as Jesus often said, here was a demonstration that something was afoot, something which made believing in Jesus' resurrection not so strange after all.

And the potential division within the fledgling church caused by hypocrisy was simply not there because as we read the apostles were all together in Solomon's Portico.

In other bibles this is translated as them being “all of one accord” and I think this translation actually reflects exactly what Jane was saying last week about the apostles being of one heart and mind. In both instances; all together physically and spiritually in one place together.

And the outcome was that more and more people were becoming believers in and followers of Jesus and significantly were doing so right under the noses of the Jewish religious authorities in the Temple grounds.

The temple wasn't just a single building like a church or cathedral but was a whole complex of buildings spread out over dozens of acres with interconnecting streets, gardens and private areas accessed by several gateways and arches – a bit like the square mile we refer to as the City of London within Greater London, but with the Temple being so much larger than our own square mile.

And of course at the middle of the Temple complex was the holy of holies where the Jews believed God resided. You couldn't really choose a more confrontational place to teach all about Jesus Christ, as far as the religious authorities were concerned.

So, no wonder they were arrested and imprisoned.

#### VERSES 19

V 19 “During the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out....”

Here's a different supernatural sign and wonder for us to look at and I think the first point to note is that the apostles do not immediately run when freed to hide from the authorities as they had done just a few months before when Jesus was arrested.

No, they are now fully committed to the teaching of Jesus Christ; they have accepted their commissions given to them and this act surely would have increased their confidence by showing them they were under the continual care of God.

The Saducees did not believe in the existence of angels yet there are six distinct works of angels related in Acts. In this instance there's no mention of an earthquake or a friendly guard opening the prison doors.

At the very least the perplexity and anxiety of the Saducees must have been increased with no other viable explanation being offered.

What better way to show the Saducees that their understanding of what was going on was wrong.

#### VERSE 20:

But the angel gives specific instruction to the apostles in verse 20:

“Go stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life”. Let's tease that instruction out a little

**GO** – How many times had the disciples been told to 'go' by Jesus or heard that instruction given by Jesus to someone else, I wonder?

Jesus told them to 'go and see how many loaves' they had in the story of the feeding of the 5000

He told them to 'go into the village ahead' to find the donkey and colt for his entry into Jerusalem.

They had heard him tell the royal official 'go; your son is healed'

and of course they had during what is called the great commission been told by Jesus 'go therefore and make disciples of all nations'.

So they knew all about the word 'go' - it was a time to get busy; to do what Jesus had instructed them to do. This was without doubt a further commission offering assurance, if needed, that God, not the high priests or Saducees directed their lives.

**STAND** – Jesus had told many people to stand during his ministry when he healed them just as Peter and John had done to the beggar at the Beautiful gate which I spoke about last month but here 'stand' takes on a different meaning, I think. They are to stand and speak against the injustice that had been perpetrated on them by simply standing in defiance of the order to stop preaching.

And of course if they were to stand, there was no way they could run away, the very word implies courage and steadfastness of belief.

**AND SPEAK** – They were told to defy the authorities who had told them quite specifically to stop preaching. By doing so they give the people a new and impressive proof of the truth of their message.

That they were imprisoned would have been known by the people; that they were made as secure as possible would also have been known. When therefore the next morning, before they could have been tried or acquitted, they were standing in the temple, delivering the same message as before their arrest was yet another sign that they were sent by God to speak as they were.

**IN THE TEMPLE** – in other words in a place which is both public and conspicuous. They have nothing to hide; God does not do things in backrooms and ally ways because he has something to hide.

On the contrary, he has nothing to hide. They were told to return and speak in public in Solomon's Portico – that had the capacity for five thousand listeners.

And, as events turn out, any further arrest would have to be done publicly too.

**TO THE PEOPLE** – their message was being rejected by religious leaders but being accepted in ever increasing numbers by the common people, which includes all those on the fringes of society whom Jesus paid particular attention to during his ministry.

It is the people who are important; not the authorities is the message here.

**ALL THE WORDS OF THIS LIFE** – they were to continue the same teaching as before; the way of eternal life through faith which Christ had revealed through his death and resurrection.

They were not to appeal to the multitude for sympathy, nor try to incite feelings against the Saducees but simply to reveal the gospel Jesus had taught.

And the word 'all' means to leave absolutely nothing out, particularly the doctrine of salvation from sin and death through resurrection which the Saducees simply denied could happen - not just in the instance of Jesus Christ for but all of mankind.

The Saducees considered themselves to be guardians of the holiest spot on earth, the holy of holies within the temple complex. They simply could not allow the apostles to carry on as they were. As far as they were concerned, the very fabric of Judaism as they knew and taught it was being undermined.

They feared Israel would be led astray and disaster might strike, as it had in times past. No something had to be done.

That something is a story for another day, but nearly two thousand years on, as descendent members of the fledgling movement which became known as the Christian Church we are still commissioned to stand and speak publicly to the people about the message of the gospel.

The Alpha course has transformed the lives of some hardened and violent criminals in our jails; Christianity Against Poverty fights for the underprivileged and socially deprived in our nation; the Food Bank charity provides for the daily essentials for some of our local families who simply find themselves unable to feed themselves from their own resources.

We have spoken from time to time about the Tearfund initiative which we saw at first hand in Uganda.

In October we will have a guest speaker from Tearfund visiting to update us on how our support is helping to transform the lives of the people involved.

As you will hear in more detail, that transformation started, developed and continues ever onwards and upwards as a direct result of the gospel's teaching; nothing more, nothing less than living out what the Angel told the apostles:

Go. Stand. Speak. Tell. The gospel.

The gospel isn't just a book or collection of books, it is a way of life. The Saducees just didn't get that and yet that is our legacy. We are instructed to Go. Stand. Speak. Tell.

In my own way, that is what I have been doing for the past 15 minutes. Who has got the cuffs? Or are we all of one

accord, and they are not needed today?