

Bennochy church 3rd April 2016

Here's a bit of a gruesome thought, but it is an experience that many have endured thought the centuries. If you were under the threat of death, what would you do, or what would you say. Would you keep quiet, no matter what might happen to you, or would you, to protect yourself, give up the information that others wanted? We are talking torture here. Would you stand up for what you believed, no matter the consequences, or would you deny your faith so that you might go free and have an easier life? We are talking persecution. A reality for many Christians today. I think the reality is, we would not know how we would react, until we were actually in that situation? We would like to think we are strong, but bold words in times of freedom and peace are easy. In the face of ridicule of pain, they might easily turn to denial.

It happened to Peter of 'walking on water' fame! He leapt over the side of a boat to follow Jesus. It worked for a while until he realised where he was and then he started to sink! At Caesarea Philippi, it was Peter who recognised Jesus as the Messiah. If ever there was a man of strong faith, who was not going to deny Jesus, surely it was going to be Peter. Before he was cornered in the court yard, following what was happening to Jesus, his words were indeed strong and bold. Jesus, *I will never deny you*. When challenged, *are you not one of those Galileans?* When the rubber hit the road. When he felt his life was under threat, he

denied Jesus, not once, but three times. Let's not be too hard on Peter. We were not in that courtyard, and it was not us who were challenged over our friendship with Jesus. We can imagine the scene, but it did not happen to us.

What a difference Pentecost made. The coming of the Spirit of God. The men who hid in an upper room while others stood at the cross, now are emboldened to speak in the name of Jesus, in spite of strict instructions from the Jewish authorities not to do so. These men who did not believe the claims of the women, who said the tomb was empty, are now going into the public places and talking about new life. They hid in a room to be met by the risen Christ. Thomas touched the wounds. It is these men, who have been arrested because they now proclaim what they believe. What a difference Pentecost makes!

Put yourselves in their shoes and hear the words of their accusers, led by the High Priest, who presided over the Sanhedrin or ruling judicial Council. *See what you have done! You speak of this man (they did not name him as Jesus of Nazareth), and you have the cheek to make us responsible for his death*. The accusation against the apostles is about inciting unrest, which was going to make the Romans a bit twitchy. And if they are the main Jewish leaders, they are the ones who would feel the wrath of Rome.

Talk about digging a hole for themselves and jumping in! The apostles are in real hot water now! The charge of disobedience

seems almost incidental. It is now getting personal and this is where it becomes dangerous for the apostles. They are claiming that it was the Jewish authorities who killed Jesus, sent by the very God, they claimed to worship. The apostles were now touching a raw nerve. These were indeed guilty men. The accusation of the apostles was now getting very close to home! If the charge was blasphemy, and many might have genuinely believed that, the decision to get rid of Jesus was actually political. They got rid of Jesus, who was for them a revolutionary threat.

The easy option would have been to just deny the charges and get a good lawyer, or negotiate some kind of plea bargaining; *let us go and we promise, not do it again*, or at least put in some mitigating plea, *that is not what we meant, there has been a breakdown in communication*. But remember this conversation is not part of a debating society, there is here a risk to life. What would we do? They felt that they had no option but to be witnesses. We stand accused as charged. God brings life and forgiveness. You, nailed Jesus on the cross. If salvation has been given by God, then the Jewish authorities have totally missed point and the opportunity. I wonder if they were playing to guilty minds? Their disobedience that became the denial of the religious authorities and men of Pentecost whose original denial now becomes obedience. In their shoes, what would we do?

The authorities were furious and wanted to put the Apostles to death. They did not actually have the power to do that officially, but that is how they felt. Feel their anger. This was a direct challenge to their political power. However, it would have been highly suspicious if all the apostles had disappeared at the same time. Thought throughout history, dictatorships have tried that trick. That however, is not what happened. Gamaliel intervenes and said, leave them alone, if it is of human origin, it will disappear, if it is of God, you cannot defeat them.

The Council followed Gamaliel's advice. Gives them a good whipping, tell them not to speak in the name of Jesus and lets them go. Where are they to be found? Talking about Jesus in the Temple and in people's homes. They could not help but being witnesses.

The apostles stand in a long line of prophets who confronted kings, powerful men and unjust societies. Their response is our challenge, *obey God, not men*. Their response, accepted the consequences of obedience! Their response, is a 21st century response that asks of us; give God a voice; give the arms of Christ a compassionate touch; and his legs to walk the paths of justice. Their response is Spirit filled, echoing the words of the prophet Micah; *No, the LORD has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God. Amen.*