

There when we need: Courage in our fears

We can sing along with the boy David, *“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.”*- Psalm 23:4. *God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble* – Psalm 43:1. But do we know that for ourselves?

What stands out for me in this episode is the great courage shown by Peter and John. They had just spent the night in jail for reaching about Jesus. But once released, they were back at it, boldly speaking of Him again and refusing to comply with the authorities’ command not to speak about their risen Lord Jesus in the future, even though this could have meant being thrown back in jail, and even death by crucifixion.

I find it hard to imagine ever having such courage. Yet these disciples were not super-humans. That same Peter had in the past rashly declared he would die for Christ but he fell far short of this when his pledge was tested, denying his Lord instead – 3 times. Clearly the Spirit had changed him, and had given him the boldness he once lacked.

Does that mean that because we too, have the Spirit, we will never experience fear? No, many of us are now living with new fears and worry: for ourselves and for those we love; for our lives, for our physical and mental health; for livelihoods; for the local Church; of how we may cope with losses and big changes. In truth, the reality – as I reflected on last Sunday - is that the Spirit is not some sort of magic bullet - or cloak - that prevents us feeling afraid of anything that will happen in the future. Rather, the Spirit helps us when we need it.

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch Christian, who became an inspirational survivor of a German concentration camp. She had been sent there as a middle-aged unmarried lady, a skilled jeweller and a church Youth club leader, who along with her old father and elder sister, Betsie, and the Dutch resistance, over a 3 year period, helped hundreds of Dutch Jews hide in their family home and escape Nazi genocide. 50 years ago, as a student, I heard Corrie ten Boom tell a packed meeting hall of how she had been very concerned as a child that she would never be strong enough to die for Christ. Her father had used an illustration to help her see that, just because she was not brave enough now, that did not then mean that she would lack the necessary courage if ever she found herself needing it. He reminded her that he did not give her the ticket money for a train journey weeks in advance (no Covid-19 requirement to book and pay in advance then) weeks in advance but just before she boarded the train. Similarly, **God does give us the strength we need to cope with troubles at the time we need it and not before.**

That was true for Peter and John as it is for us also. The risen Christ told Paul, *“My grace is sufficient for you; my power is made perfect in your weakness.”* 2 Cor 12:9. May we know the words God tells His people most often in the Bible, *“Do not be afraid for I am with you”* Thank God as we sing MP 115 Do not be afraid. – words from Isaiah 43: 1-4

14/6/20 Acts 4: 1-12 **Back to basics – In Christ alone**

Every year, in the weeks after Pentecost Sunday, I, find myself drawn to the accounts of the early days of Christ's Church in Acts. They present a challenge if we are stuck in our own personal ruts to get back to basics and to be reminded of our key message both in words and in actions. And of how the Spirit impacted lives then and still does.

First, a great boldness because our confidence is not about us but all about God's gracious love in & through Jesus; and in God's presence & power through the Spirit at work in human lives. T-I-N-A (There is no alternative!), an infamous slogan of UK government policy in the 1980's. The claims of Jesus and of Peter are unambiguous and exclusive: *I am the way, the truth & the life. No one comes to God the Father except through me.* John 14:6. *There is no other name by which we may be saved.* Acts 4:12

We might have expected the very public healing of the paralysed man at the Temple in Acts 3 to convince people of the disciples' message. But many of the Jewish leaders were offended & felt threatened by this act of kindness & healing. Many were Sadducees, a group that did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, so they refused to accept that Christ had been raised. The Sadducees were a well-to-do group in the Jewish establishment. They were also keen to hold onto their power and so would have feared any kind of message that would stir up the people, cause disorder and incur the wrath of their Roman overlords. And Caiaphas was the same High Priest who had interrogated Jesus and sent him to Pilate to crucify. So Peter was boldly criticising a dangerous and powerful enemy.

When reading the Book of Acts, we may sometimes feel disheartened for the early church appears so much more dynamic than our church today: eg. v. 4 says that about 5000 people came to Christ. But notice also that although the message was presented powerfully through a miracle and the preaching of Peter, a relatively uneducated fisherman from Galilee, who had known Jesus well, not everyone was convinced. The Sadducees were stuck in their ways, happy with the status quo and unwilling to admit they were wrong. That is a reminder that people's response to the gospel is not simply down to how good a job we do at presenting it: those who hear it have free will to accept it or not.

Let's trust to God's grace the people we want to reach to share the peace and healing He brings as we pray for boldness and sensitivity in sharing the grace and truth of Jesus; and also that our own stubborn pride, timidity and resistance to change does not get in the way.