

Acts 5:27-42
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

'I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail, but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!'
(Acts 5:38-39)

1 For the Easter season our Old Testament lesson is replaced by a series of readings from the Acts of the Apostles, which do not otherwise appear in the Lectionary; and mainly these are testimonies to the Resurrection by the apostles. I preached on these readings at Morning Worship for our (then) two congregations three years ago, and I said all I had to say about Thomas then. So the words I have taken to reflect upon this morning do not appear in our set reading from Acts, but they are really part of the ending of the story in Acts 5. Spoken by Gamaliel in the Sanhedrin they convinced the more hot-headed, who wanted to kill Peter and John as well. In fact, the Christian Church may not appreciate how much it owes to Gamaliel, since his words may very well explain why the extreme hostility shown by the chief priests at the trial of Jesus seems to have died down very quickly. The fact that persecution arose so quickly afterwards, as personified by Saul of Tarsus suggests that the respite was brief, though decisive. In certain circumstances Gamaliel's words may even offer guidance across the centuries in dealing with direct action like the 'Extinction Revolution'; perhaps even they might have been helpful to the 38% of the electorate who voted for Brexit in 2016, but as the months pass, that is an ever more forlorn hope. They are certainly very helpful in dealing with movements for change within the Church, such as those we have been experiencing in recent years.

2 What the episode in Acts 5 does show is that after Pentecost the apostles lost little time, after their initial doubts and confusion over what the death and resurrection of Jesus meant, in going out and speaking with a new-found confidence in their synagogues and even the Temple. And their actions were accompanied by miracles of healing – even if Peter's shadow passed over them (something never suggested of Jesus in Luke's Gospel). Acts 5 begins unpromisingly from our point of view with the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who sold some property to benefit the church, but failed to hand over the whole sum, keeping back some of the proceeds for themselves, perhaps for a rainy day. When Peter told Ananias that he had lied not only to the apostles but also to God, he was so shocked that he dropped down dead (again, something which does not sound like the Jesus of Luke's Gospel). And the same happened to Sapphira when confronted with the news. Of course, you can never predict how people will react to bad news; and there is no suggestion that Peter intended the death of Ananias and Sapphira: nevertheless the story makes one think – commitment to the Church at this early stage was seen very much as a matter of life and death, as is often the case in a period of persecution.

3 Nor was the boldness of Peter and John without its consequences. First they were put in prison; but, we are told, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors for them and told them to go to the temple and tell the people about Jesus's life. When the chief priests sent for Peter and John in prison and found the doors securely locked (according to the temple police) but no sign of the apostles, they were wondering what to do next, when they received reports that Peter and John were back in the temple, carrying on as before. Not surprisingly they were irritated! And things were made worse by Peter's vigorous defence of the apostles' actions, and doubtless particularly by their invocation of the Holy Spirit in their defence.

4 You have to read this story slowly and carefully to appreciate the narrative skill Luke uses in building up the tension to the climax, which is Gamaliel's cautionary advice. Now we know the ending of this story; but how might we have reacted, if we had not? Would we have been on the side of what I have called the 'hotheads' in the council, or would we have been more cautious? It is comforting to think that we would have been cautious, but is it true? A story like this challenges us to think deeply about not only the nature of our own commitment, but also that which we expect of others.

5 Sadly there are many stories of persecution of Christians today. Think for a moment about the horrifying attacks in Sri Lanka a week ago. +James Jones on 'Thought for the Day' earlier last week confessed how he stumbled over the words 'no more we doubt thee' in one of the hymns as he took last Sunday's service in his village church. There was no warning – or none that got through – no opportunity to escape: those who died were involuntary martyrs. But move further west, and Christians who were driven from their homes in Iraq in the last ten years, now trickling back, suffered bombing and shelling continuously before they could escape, after their communities had lived safely for centuries. They may not describe their escape from prisons in terms of angels of the Lord unlocking the doors, but the end-result was the same. In fact some figures published last week suggest that Christianity is the most persecuted faith in the world today.

6 In John 20:21, there is a little word between 'Peace be with you' and what follows – 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'. 'As' means 'in the same way'. Being sent by the Father involves more than just an instruction; it is a commission – 'a sending with' (in the Latin). The one who accompanies is God, perhaps particularly in the form of Christ or the Holy Spirit. It is a commission to follow the same path that Jesus followed, and it comes after Jesus showed the disciples his hands and his feet. We have grown accustomed through the last millennium in living as though we were 'on top'. All the signs are that this is now coming to an end. But our task remains the same. As we rightly and joyfully sing our resurrection hymns, alongside our brothers and sisters in Iraq and Syria, do we recognise what they involve? Is there need to say more?