

“On Trial For Faith” – Acts 5:27-32 – Easter 2 – Apr 15, 2007

Can you remember back to the opening of the reading from Acts? “When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them.” It’s too bad we have to start this story in the middle. It’s too bad, because as we do that – start in the middle – it is confusing as to whom the players are, and what the situation is, and most of the reading has gone past before you catch on to who’s who and what’s what.

Although it’s too bad that we have to start the story in the middle, it’s also kind of necessary, because if we didn’t we’d still be reading! But just the same I feel it is necessary to back up a bit and at least put the incident of the disciples on trial before the Sanhedrin into perspective.

We’ll go back as far as the incident of Ananias and his wife Sapphira. Not many people are comfortable with knowing that the early church – at least according to Luke – started as an example of pure communism – as in commune. Not that they were into old VW vans and funny brownies like the communes on the islands around here, but communes in the sense of togetherness. Luke tells us in Acts – the second half of the Gospel of Luke – that “now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” (4:32)

Ananias and his wife Sapphira, you may recall, cheated this share-all faith community. They sold a piece of property – not their only piece of property by the looks of it – but instead of laying all the proceeds of the sale at the disciples’ feet held back some of the money. When confronted with this dastardly deed, Ananias dropped dead on the spot and his body was hustled out and buried forthwith. Some three hours later, we are told, the same fate befell his wife who was in on the deal, and she was buried beside her husband. The lesson? Don’t mess with these disciples, for they are truly connected to God and the legitimate heirs of Jesus’ ministry! And indeed, the disciples carried on the healing ministry of Jesus, with sick people being brought out into the streets to them, and all were cured.

That lesson demonstrating the legitimate power of the disciples was soon repeated for the high priests and all the religious poobahs around them in the court of the Sanhedrin. The high priests, apparently fearful and angry at all these good and powerful works, arrested the disciples and tossed them in jail. But the next day, when the court convened, not only were the disciples no longer behind bars – an angel had unlocked the door and set them free during the night – but worse they were discovered in the temple teaching the people! The captain of the guard went with the temple police and brought them to court.

This is where we enter our text for today, with the disciples being brought before the high court and being accused not only of teaching but of contempt, for they had already been ordered to cease and desist with the healing of people and preaching the good news. Now contempt of court is a fairly serious matter, especially when it’s the court dealing with it! I think we could understand if the disciples had mumbled an apology, offered to tone it down a bit, and slipped quietly away – after all, that’s the normal way to deal with this kind of charge. But not Peter! Oh no, good old Peter who always seems to lead with his mouth, sticks it right in the high priest’s face. “We obey God, instead of you”, says Peter in his opening response. And if that wasn’t confrontational enough, he goes on to accuse the high priest of killing Jesus, whom God had exalted by raising from the dead, pointing out explicitly how God’s power was more effective than the high priest’s.

You can imagine the uproar this must have caused in the high court. The text hardly does it justice – and our reading stops short of even mentioning it, but we do get a clue that the reaction was pretty much as you might expect. Pandemonium. A gavel banging repeatedly, drowned out by the roar of voices from the bench calling out in protest. A chorus of voices demanding the deaths of these people who were thumbing their noses at the legal system, even blasphemously daring to claim the

authority of God for their actions and words. Yes, this could have so easily been the end of the fledgling church, cut short right at the beginning with the high court reacting predictably to this outrageous behaviour from these followers of Jesus.

But into this mayhem and chaos came another voice, a voice calling for calm and reason. The voice of a man – identified by name as Gamaliel – a popular and respected teacher of the law. While I'm sure he would be embarrassed by the reference, this scene reminds me of the times that the Rev. Dr. Stephen Farris, Dean of St. Andrew's Hall, rises to address Presbytery in the midst of a kafuffle. The court goes respectfully silent as people actually listen instead of merely contributing to the noise. In any event, Gamaliel rises and addresses the court – after moving “in camera” or “behind closed doors” – and points out the wisdom of not moving too quickly to a decision. He cited a couple of examples of men who had been acclaimed as “somebody's”, a Thadeus and Judas the Galilean, but who both had died and their followings had died out soon after. Gamaliel makes the profound – prophetic, even – recommendation to leave these disciples of Jesus alone, arguing that if it is a merely human venture it will soon fail of its own accord but if this movement is of God then it cannot be stopped. His argument prevails, and after a token flogging and another warning to cease and desist the disciples are released – “rejoicing that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name [of Jesus].”

This is a fascinating drama, full of tension and emotion. It concludes successfully and bears a powerful message of the legitimacy of the disciples of Jesus and God's affirmation of them and their ministry. It is no wonder that Luke has chosen this as one of a series of such incidents to demonstrate the hand of God at work in sustaining and developing the early church. We can read these incidents, savour the tension, and rejoice at the outcome as we review the ways in which the church grew in spite of troubles and persecution and danger.

But where does this story – and the others like it – touch our lives? After all, we're not likely to be called before the Supreme Court on trial for our faith, are we? What odds that we, like the early disciples, would be in danger of being imprisoned, flogged, or even face the death penalty for proclaiming our faith in public? Growing up and living as a follower of Jesus in a “Christian” country – no matter how nominal that term may have become – does not pose anything like the dangers faced by the early believers. It's easy to be a Christian in Canada today – at worst you'll be considered a bit odd.

Now as much as I dislike the bumper-sticker proclamations about Jesus that pass for theology today, there is one that I have to admit is somewhat relevant to this incident from the Book of Acts. It poses the question, “If you were charged with being a Christian today, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” It is an intriguing question, isn't it? What kind of evidence would be required? What if anything could “prove” you're a Christian? What does it mean to be a Christian anyway? These are foundational questions, questions worth asking – and answering. And the starting question is a dangerous one, because it is often the source of many misunderstandings in faith.

Let's take it from the beginning. What does it mean to be a Christian? Scripture, especially the apostle Paul, tells us that being a Christian is defined by believing that Jesus died and rose again reconciling us with God, that the Holy Spirit is God's way of working in the world, and that the church is the continuing body of Christ. One danger is that this is an awfully internal kind of definition that shows no difference on the outside from any other kinds of beliefs. Simply holding these beliefs without them affecting the way you behave in the world provides no evidence at all – and you would safely never be charged never mind convicted of being a Christian.

At the other end of a spectrum of faith are those who believe that being a Christian is only about doing good works – that through righteous behaviour one can be a Christian without having to

believe all that hoohaw about Jesus and death and resurrection and prophets and healing and stuff. Sadly, these are the people who would be wrongly convicted of being Christians on the basis of plenty of “evidence.” Sadly too this end of the spectrum often includes those who would try desperately to show the world they are Christians through zealous behaviour, who would exclude the poor, the lonely, the grieving, the down-trodden and down-hearted all in the name of some misguided effort to be seen as pure, and righteous, and sin-free.

In the middle of this spectrum however are those who really should be convicted of being Christian. People who have heard the sacrifice made on their behalf by Jesus, and who respond with the love he called his followers to practice in his name. People who both believe that the love of God in Jesus has overcome every barrier between them and God, and who react by proclaiming that forgiveness and love to all who would listen, following the lead of the early disciples who “every day in the temple and at home did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.” People like you and like me who can quietly stand and declare with our lives, echoing Peter, “we are witnesses to these things.”