

Easter II – 28th April 2019

Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-end

The Good News of Repentance.

A few thoughts about that first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles.

Acts, you might well know, was probably written by St. Luke, as kind of sequel to his Gospel: what happened next, after the empty tomb and the first days of the Resurrection. It's the story of the Gospel and the Church growing and growing, as it says in the first chapter about the apostles being Jesus' witnesses in Judaea, Samaria and 'even to the ends of the earth.' It ends with St. Paul in Rome, the centre of the Empire, ready to tell Caesar about the new, true, King of the world.

The story today is quite near the beginning, in chapter 5. We're still back in Jerusalem. It's a matter of perhaps some weeks since people first claimed they'd seen Jesus, since the tomb had first been found empty. Perhaps the authorities had hoped it all would have quietened down by now, the buzz would have passed, things would have returned to normal. Not so. The Jesus crowd kept on making noise, kept on growing, kept on stirring thing up – kept on, it seemed to the leaders, pointing the finger at *them*. So it is time now for some steel. Time to drag those apostles in and show them that what happened to Jesus could also happen to them: pipe down, or die.

And Peter's response is beautifully simple: we must obey God rather than any human authority. High Priest, Governing Council: do your worst. We're really not impressed by all your power, all your weapons, all your ability to do force and killing. We've just seen all that tossed aside by Jesus. We've just seen the great big stone you put on top of Him rolled away. We know his power is coming, and yours is ending. You don't scare us anymore.

That's a thought for us, isn't it? We live in a country where it is remarkably unlikely that anyone is going to threaten us with death for preaching Jesus. That's the fate of our brothers and sisters elsewhere, as we saw all too bitterly in Sri Lanka last week. We face a different kind of pressure, which is that talking about faith, about God and Jesus might seem awkward, embarrassing. And perhaps more than that: there's lots in our culture that not so subtly implies that if you believe in God - really, seriously believe in God, as in make your life revolve around belief in God - you're not very bright and you're probably a bigot. That's why Richard Dawkins, for instance, said that raising your child Christian was a kind of child abuse.

And lots of people believe that, and understandably it's easy to give into it, and keep quiet about our faith. We say things like, "well it's personal. I don't talk about it much." "Faith is a private thing, you shouldn't shove it down other people's throats." And while there is something right in that kind of reserve, let's not kid ourselves – very often, it's really just a cover for cowardice. We don't want to stand out, to be awkward, to be embarrassed. We've let the culture shut us down and shut us up in a way Peter and the others would never have done. If swords did not do it for them, a bit of social unease should not do it for us. If we

really believe that what we say about Jesus is true – that in Him, in His death and resurrection, the whole world is being made new and alive and being turned into beauty and joy – well, that is such an astonishingly big and important and wonderful thing that the idea of just keeping quiet about it is bizarre. Woe is me, says Paul somewhere, if I don't preach the Gospel. Jeremiah says the same thing: 'If I say I will not mention him, or speak anymore in his name, then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones, I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.' *I cannot* – if you've really grasped who God is, and what God has done, what Jesus and his Cross and Resurrection mean, you *cannot* hold it in. You'll *have* to preach the Gospel. That's why Luke had to write the sequel: once Peter and the rest of them knew the risen Jesus, there was no question: the fire was going to spread.

So here's a question: who was the last person you spoke to about all this? Who was the last person you tried to help see what you see in Jesus? And if, in all honesty, you can't remember, because you so seldom have those conversations – why is that? What is it that stops you – and should it?

One more thought. Listen to how Peter actually does it, what he says the important thing about Jesus is. *God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, so that he might give repentance to Israel. So that he might give repentance to Israel.* That's a really odd way of putting it, isn't it? Why should repentance have to be *given* to anyone, and why should that be a happy and a wonderful thing?

Well, the key thing is to understand that repentance is about way, way more than feeling guilty. When Peter talks about Jesus giving repentance to Israel, he does *not* mean he makes people realise how bad they are. Some people do need help on that score, but actually lots of people can do guilt perfectly well by themselves. *Repentance* is something far more splendid. Repentance means actually turning around, reversing. It means a whole new character coming into being. It means people who were driven by greed and fear and hate being free from those things, and beginning to live lives out of depths they never had before – depths of love and joy and God.

Well that is something we could definitely long for by ourselves, but bitter experience says we couldn't actually *do it*. We're too trapped in ourselves, in our old ways of doing things, to bring that kind of change about in ourselves, for ourselves. But the Gospel is that that deep down heart-change is possible, because Jesus gives it to us. And, just to shift the focus for a moment to our Gospel reading, maybe the best way to imagine that is as Him breathing it into us: *He breathed on them, and said 'receive the Holy Spirit.'* He breathed on them: think of it like the kiss of life. His breath, flowing into us, reviving us, giving us his life, the life we were meant to live but lost somehow, the life of humanity in the image of God. Our corruption reversed, our failure and death turned around – repentance.

That's beautiful. That's Good News. And that's why, like Peter and the rest of them, if we know it, we must share it. Amen.