

Notes for Sunday 4th July 2021

Acts 4:23-31 Speaking the word of God boldly

The story so far: Peter and John have healed a lame man in the temple. When this got the attention of the crowd, they took the opportunity to tell them about Jesus. As a result, they were arrested by the temple guard, held in jail overnight, then put on trial before the authorities the next day. As the lame man was there for everyone to see, it was obvious a miracle had happened, so the court could only threaten them and let them go – with the instruction that they must not speak any more in the name of Jesus.

Dealing with crises

The court had let them go – this time. But they had still threatened the disciples, and it might not go so well next time. Remember, it was only a few weeks before that the same court had condemned Jesus. The authorities now definitely knew who they were, and this was a real crisis for the early church. What should they do?

V23-24 – they went to ‘their own people’ and, together, they prayed. They had a network of people they could turn to in a time of crisis, and these would do more than just offer human solidarity – they would get together to pray to God about it. My connect group has its own WhatsApp group so we can keep in touch with each other with prayer requests every day. Other ways are to talk or use the telephone. The important thing is to have other Christian friends you can share prayer with, so you can encourage each other to bring the crises of life (and its mere problems!), and also its joys and thanksgiving, to God. What can you do to take part in such a support group?

God’s sovereignty

The disciples didn’t pretend the problem wasn’t there. Instead (v24) they concentrated on the sovereignty of God (his rule and authority over everything and all circumstances).

Notice how they were ‘soaked in scripture’. It’s all through Acts. They knew their Bibles well, and could use that knowledge to relate things God had done in the past to problems they were facing today.

Here they started with King David’s Psalm 2 (v25-26). Originally that was about opposition to the king’s rule, but it came increasingly to be seen as Messianic, a prophecy about the futility of opposition to God’s coming Messiah, Jesus. In their prayer they reminded themselves of God’s rule from the time of David right up to their own time (v27). Their faith was that, even though God’s enemies intended evil, he could overcome it to fulfil his own purposes (v28).

What to pray for

It’s interesting to think about what they didn’t pray for!

They didn’t ask for the opposition and threats to be taken away.

They didn’t ask for wisdom to know how to behave so that people didn’t get annoyed with them.

What they did ask for (v29) was boldness to keep on speaking about Jesus, and that God would keep on reinforcing their message with more signs and miracles like the healing of the lame man (v30).

They seemed to regard the problems they were facing (the opposition) as just a natural part of life if they wanted to follow God.

Licence to offend?

So far, it's been about boldness and speaking up against whatever opposition may come our way. But is this just a licence to offend and be insensitive?

Remember, the disciples were speaking from a position of absolutely no (human) power. Sometimes in history the church has had real political or physical power and been able to impose its will on other people. Often the result has been more about condemning people for their sins (preferably ones that we can't be fingered for!) rather than showing the grace of Jesus.

The fundamental principle they wouldn't give up here was to be able to speak about Jesus. How do we get the balance right about how we use the boldness they were asking for when it comes to dealing with people whose lifestyles are very different from our own?

Are we up for it?

Think about how those first disciples responded to the crises they faced (remember from the beginning of Acts – boldness wasn't their strong suit at first). How does that challenge us for our lives?

Are we up for it?

Connect Group questions

Readings: Acts 4:23-31

- The disciples got together and prayed when a crisis threatened. How can you have a support group like that? How can you communicate with each other day-to-day? Do you have any examples of where that has helped?
- Why is it difficult to trust in the sovereignty of God when crises come? How do you keep the ability to trust him through such times?
- Are you surprised by what the disciples did and didn't pray for in the difficult circumstances? How might their example affect what you ask God for and expect from him?
- What's the difference between the boldness they were asking for and a willingness to be insensitive and offend people? How do you get the balance right in your time and place?
- So, are we up for it?