

Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse – November 1st 2009

Acts 5:17-42

Ian began by illustrating a case of deception in the town where his parents live. A man who for 30 years had put on a white coat and operated a car park which belonged neither to the Council nor to the Fairground had simply taken the money and moved to Spain when he retired. This sort of greed and deception also takes place in the Church; in fact Luke does not present an idealised community of nice people. In the church, you will find in the same row faithfulness and foolishness sitting next to each other.

After Ananias and Sapphira have died, great fear seizes the Church and no one else dared join the believers probably because they feared that their own lives would be scutinised. But something happens between verses 13 and 14 because just when the church seems at its most formidable is the point at which the church grows. Alan Kreider: "In the first three centuries the church grew in direct proportion to the extent to which it was difficult to join the church" When the gospel is watered down then churches empty within a generation. When churches raise the gospel standard, form communities of deep fellowship, and preachers announce the full gospel, churches grow and flourish, and reach the sick, the lame, the oppressed, the lost the last and the least.

But what happens next is inevitable. The powers-that-be are not delighted at the religious revival, but they are jealous and have the apostles arrested. But the next morning they are gone, and are back in the temple, turning the crowds over to the message of Jesus Christ. If the authorities had arrested them, they themselves would have been stoned for blasphemy!

This kind of thing has been repeated down the centuries where vibrant faith has clashed with those who would preserve the status quo: countries like Romania, China, and even in our own country with bishops who don't believe in the resurrection.

So if Peter was going to make the message more palatable now would be a good time, in front of the Sanhedrin. But he preaches the most confrontational sermon. He reminds them that they condemned Jesus and then God proved them wrong by raising Jesus from the dead. He knows it will upset the establishment but understands that preserving the status quo is not what the common people want, who hear the message gladly. It's not the gospel of the 'do a little bit better' kind of religion, but the hope of grace, love, mercy and forgiveness. They do not need entertainment but rescuing from the mess of their lives.

The world does not need the church to massage its ego, but needs the message of repentance and a brand new life. Not a light within, but a word from the outside that God has come and he has given me hope and filled me.

The tragedy is that the church is not delivering this Peter message. Willimon says: "our communication has lost its nerve. Nothing is said that cannot be heard elsewhere. We give out petty moralisms and self-help. We are unable to preach Christ and him crucified, we preach humanity and it improved."

Long quote from the TV programme ER.

Peter doesn't flinch. The Sanhedrin were furious. But it is a learned man, a rabbi, Gamaliel who intervenes, saying that if this movement is a human one, it will fail, but if it is of God no one will stop it. The issue is not whether you are educated or not, or if you are from the clergy or not, but whether you are looking for the Kingdom of God. Gamaliel saved the apostles' lives, and they went on preaching unhindered.

We must pray for the unhindered proclamation of the Gospel. Nor will we avoid persecution, and sometimes this is an 'out-of-season time' when we shall be sowing 'in tears'. But let us always make it a full gospel.