

Church Re-Envisioned

Last week, we looked at a couple of famous speeches, executed by Australian and foreign leaders, in the face of incredible challenges. In her maiden speech to Parliament, Federal Member for Macquarie, Susan Templeman, spoke of the painful recovery process following the 2013 fires and the need to speak up, to confront issues that arose with insurance companies and government red tape:

*“People are then forced to make the heartbreaking decision not to rebuild, and the painfully slow road to recovery for a community after a bushfire will be much slower and much more painful. But, as locals put it, ‘You can’t scare me, I’m from Winmalee.’ We are not easily dismissed ...”*¹

GETTING STARTED: If we face an issue where there is injustice, mistreatment or a health issue, we may have to speak up repeatedly – either for ourselves or for others around us – in order to get help and / or to get the situation rectified. Eg a doctor or teacher might dismiss our concerns, but we may feel that the situation is not being taken seriously and more could be done. What has been a situation, where you’ve taken an issue further. What was the result?

READ: ACTS 4:1-20

🗨️ What did you notice/ what things stood out, as you just read the passage?

🗨️ What things did you take away from the sermon this week?

❗ There is a saying that “the dog that barks loudest, is the one that got hit”. There’s a sure-fire way to get a strong public reaction – and that is by challenging the underlying beliefs and values of a group of people. At the beginning of Acts 4, some people were “much annoyed”, not only because Peter and John were teaching the people, but also because they were “proclaiming that in Jesus there is resurrection of the dead.” (Acts 4:2) Those mentioned included priests and the Sadducees: *“The Sanhedrin was the governing body for both religious and legal issues of the Jews. The leader of the Sanhedrin was a High Priest given king-like authority - and was almost always a Sadducee. For instance, Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas are two High Priests named in the New Testament (see Matthew 26:3 and Acts 4:6). Both were Sadducees - and both played critical roles in the execution of Jesus.”*²

In Matt 22:23-24, we read that the Sadducees did not believe in the afterlife or in the resurrection of the dead. When Jesus challenged their beliefs, they got angry. Now they were angry again.

🗨️ In the last week, the impeachment trial of the former US President, highlighted various behaviours and words, linked to inciting violent acts. There were strong views, opinions and emotions demonstrated by people in that trial. No doubt, as they faced the final vote, some US senators would have received threats by constituents, aimed both personally and politically. Why do some people stand firm on their conviction? And why do some people back down when they are challenged or threatened? Is it a matter of personal strength? Or the strength of their conviction?

❗ Peter and John were forced to stand in the middle of a group of religious leaders and be cross-examined by them. The leaders didn’t deny that the lame man had been healed. They did, though, want to know “by what power or by what name did you do this?” (Acts 4:7). Peter highlighted the stupidity of their question: they hadn’t committed a crime – but instead had done a “good deed”. The leaders were asking “how this man has been healed”. (Acts 4:9)

🗨️ If you’ve had an unresolved or serious medical condition, you probably contacted other people with the same condition, asking their advice and about to find out what answers they had discovered, eg available treatments and who to consult. But these religious leaders weren’t sick. What do you think was behind their question(s)?

🗨️ Consider the following verses from Jer 17:13-14:

LORD, you are the hope of Israel; all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water.

¹⁴ Heal me, LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.

What do they say about the connection between God, hope, healing and salvation?

¹ Templeman, S. (14 Sep 2016) Maiden Speech, Parliament House, Canberra.

<https://australianpolitics.com/2016/09/14/susan-templeman-alp-macquarie-maiden-speech.html>

² <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/people/who-were-the-sadducees-in-the-bible-what-were-their-beliefs.html>

❗ Phil highlighted that the accusation “Jesus ... whom you crucified”, would probably be deemed to be contempt of court in a modern-day courtroom. However, it is paralleled with the words “whom God raised from the dead”. Peter went on to use the words from Ps 118:22, to highlight that, despite their rejection of Jesus, that Jesus was the ‘cornerstone’ / ‘capstone’, or the culmination of God’s saving work.

🗨️ Acts 4:12 is one of the most provocative verses in Scripture and is a particularly controversial claim, when talking with people with other faith backgrounds or who believe that all religious faiths are either equally valid or invalid: Read this verse out loud. Each time, emphasise one word or phrase that has been put in bold. Is it essential, as part of embracing Christian faith, to also say that faith in Christ is the **ONLY** way to obtain salvation?

¹² **Salvation** is found in **no one else**, for there is **no other name** under heaven given to mankind by which we **must** be saved.”

❗ The Sanhedrin told Peter and John that, going forward, they were “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus”. (Acts 4:18) Many Christians would probably feel comfortable with this order, as it causes more discomfort and fear, to speak about Christ, than to keep quiet. Think about the following comments:

“Many factors can help those who lack boldness to witness. One is the realization of the urgency of the gospel - that people are lost without Christ. Another is prayer - asking God to give us opportunities for witness and to help us when the opportunities arise. A third is involvement in a witnessing community. Though we may be afraid to speak when alone, the presence of another Christian with us can increase our courage (note how Jesus sent his disciples out two by two). Even when we are alone, the knowledge that we belong to a witnessing community that expects its members to witness acts as a motivation to take the first steps in a witnessing situation - and the first steps are often the hardest.”³

🗨️ What things are the biggest roadblocks – for you – in sharing your faith? Is it about not wanting to upset people? Is it about trying to respect other people’s views? Is it about possibly being viewed as intolerant, a fanatic or maybe as a hypocrite? Which things in the above comments, provide you with encouragement and challenge, to start using opportunities to share your faith?

❗ Fernando lists 6 things that we find in Acts 4, which contribute to significant ministry: “**an anointing with the fullness of the Spirit** (v8) is the most important indicator, for in all significant service God is the one who does the work. ... The second and third features were **courage** (v13) and **the desire to use every opportunity to share the gospel message**. Though the gospel was offensive to the Jews, the first Christians had the inner motivation to persist in this work. ... The fourth characteristic is the **nearness to the Spirit of Christ**. (v13) This comes by spending time at the feet of the Master - learning from his Word, praying, and going out with him to serve. ... The fifth characteristic of significant service is **loyalty to God**, (v19-20) even at a risk to personal safety. H. G. Wells has said, “The trouble with so many people is that the voice of their neighbours sounds louder in their ears than the voice of God.” ... The final characteristic is **confidence over the gospel**, which comes **through our confidence in the Gospel records of the life and work of Christ**. When one’s belief in the trustworthiness of this record goes, along with it goes **belief in the uniqueness of Christ**. (v10-12)”⁴

🗨️ If you’ve been through a memorable or traumatic event, you may keep reliving that event, and people may not be able to shut you up. If you’ve just been on a fantastic holiday, you may want to share the pictures and your memories. Peter and John responded to the Sanhedrin with the comment: “**we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen or heard**.” (Acts 4:20) What is one situation that you have repeatedly recounted to different people? How did they respond, when you repeated it? In what way is gospel ministry, a recount of ‘good news’? In what way is it, ‘testifying’ about what God has done, and the way that He has worked in your life?

REFLECTION: Over the last 12 months, the world has waited for the release of Covid-19 vaccines, with the hope that that will change the situation in many countries. People have discussed the relative effectiveness of drugs produced by different pharmaceutical companies, then wondered what will happen, as new strains mutate. This has been a major news item. Yet, while wars, sickness, poverty and famine rage across the world, news about the ultimate means of addressing and healing the underlying human condition, is far from the front pages. Peter announced: there’s no other way to be saved, except by believing in the name of Jesus. What is stopping you from sharing this good news?

³ Fernando, A. (1998). *Acts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House. p160.

⁴ Fernando, A. (1998). *Acts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House. p155.