

Reading: Acts of the Apostles 5:12-14 and 17-39. Signs and Wonders of God

¹² The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. ¹³ No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

¹⁷ Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ²⁰ "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life."

²¹ At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. ²² But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, ²³ "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." ²⁴ On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to.

²⁵ Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." ²⁶ At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

²⁷ The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸ "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."

²⁹ Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings! ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

³³ When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. ³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honoured by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. ³⁵ Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. ³⁶ Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. ³⁷ After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. ³⁸ Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

Preaching notes:

Solomon's Colonnade was one of two such colonnades which surrounded the Temple area. "All the believers" would have been a significant gathering (certainly many hundreds and maybe over the course of a day with comings and goings, thousands -see 2:41) and as we learned last week, they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (2:42). As I have mentioned previously, this account of the early church within Acts' 28 chapters is an example for us of what was happening in the power of the Holy Spirit. In much the same way as we are told explicitly at the end of John's Gospel "Jesus did many other signs...these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ..." (John 20:30,31).

This passage gives us an incredibly vivid glimpse of the power of God working through the lives of the believers. When Jesus spoke concerning the coming of the Holy Spirit (John 16:5-15, Acts 1:4 and others) He was preparing them for a strengthening and empowerment that they could not have imagined. The "new life" that the angel tells them to proclaim in the temple courts (5:20) is a life empowered by the Holy Spirit; they have been "born again into a new life" (John 3:5-8).

There is so much pure gold in this passage that is provided for us to deepen and enrich our faith in the Lord Jesus, to enable us to be effective, Spirit - filled witnesses to those around us. The chief priests were the intelligentsia of their day, the captain of the temple guard probably a wise and experienced soldier/policeman yet they are at a loss to know what to do or what has happened; human logic cannot understand God, neither then, nor now.

Peter and the other apostles make clear that it is God they must obey and not man, as represented by the Sanhedrin. They then continue to remind the Sanhedrin who their God is, the God of their ancestors (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) who raised Jesus. They say, "we are witnesses...and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him". The receiving of the Holy Spirit into ourselves should not be considered "an extra" for the super-spiritual but to be as God intended: a helper, an advocate, the Spirit of truth and unity without which we are weak and powerless. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the courage to be confident and bold; without the Holy Spirit how could the apostles go straight back to doing what they had previously been arrested for doing?

In closing, consider the words of the Pharisee named Gamaliel: "leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

It is God who added to their number each day, it is God who instructed them and gave them the courage to be witnesses in a very unwelcome environment -far worse than anything we may face. It is never from a human scheme, programme or event dressed up as God, but God: Father, Spirit and Son who must be at the centre of all we say and do. Amen.