

The Church in an angry world

Acts 4.1-22

In 1998, there was a peace accord which was signed in Northern Ireland, after some 30 years of violence and killing. Republican terrorists announced that they no longer wanted to continue their armed struggle against British law enforcement. They declared a ceasefire saying they were ready to surrender their weapons. The political parties proposed what has been called the "Good Friday Agreement", a peace deal for Northern Ireland. But the people had to ratify it in a referendum. And to encourage us to vote for this peace agreement, short videos were shown on TV in which we saw a peaceful life, a life without violence, without conflict, without suffering, without war. We saw a happy life, a prosperous life and at the end of the video we were asked: "Wouldn't it be great if it was like this all the time? A prosperous life, a happy life. A life we dream of."

And after studying the first three chapters of the book of Acts, we might be tempted to say: "Wouldn't it be great if it was like this all the time? We see the birth of the Christian church, a new community of believers, a community of love, of fellowship, a community united in Christ, zealous in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. We see a community where the Holy Spirit is at work where many people are added to the church, many people are deeply touched by the Word of God, repent of their sin and believe in Jesus. You see no disagreement, no division, no opposition. It is a time of unprecedented blessing. We look at the growth of the church, we watch the advancement of the Kingdom of God, we look at the power of the gospel and we say: "Wouldn't it be great if it was like this all the time? Everything seems to be perfect for the growing church. And then we come to chapters 4 through 6. You could say that in chapters 1 through 3, it is Jesus at work by the Holy Spirit that we see. In chapters 4 to 6, it will be Satan, the enemy of Jesus, the enemy of the gospel, who will be at work. In chapter 5 he will be behind a moral failure within the church. In chapter 6 he will send false teachings. And there, what we see today in chapter 4, Satan comes in the form of persecution. The work of Jesus Christ is threatened. The church is under threat. Believers are threatened. And we want to see how they react? Are they going to pack their bags and leave for a quieter life elsewhere? Will they say, "Okay, guys, maybe it's better to keep quiet, to stop talking about Jesus? No! In Chapter 4, faced with a tsunami of opposition, they pray and ask God to give them the courage to continue talking about Jesus. Verse 29: "Give to your servants to speak your word with confidence"

The disciples ask God to help them continue to talk about Jesus, to communicate the Word of God confidently, boldly, and all in a context of opposition and hostility to the word. Isn't that what we want too? Isn't that our prayer? Isn't that our desire: to speak boldly of Jesus in a context of hostility and opposition? Who among us does not want to speak boldly about Jesus? Who has never been fearful when talking about Jesus? Who has always found it easy? What I am suggesting is that we spend two Sundays looking at this passage together because it is important for us, firstly to understand the opposition and hostility that the disciple of Jesus faces and then then to understand how to deal with it. Opposition to Jesus Christ, what does it look like? Why are people often so hostile to Jesus? And how are we to deal with hostility? So today I ask the question: "How do we explain opposition to Jesus Christ? "

It's a formidable opposition

If you were to ask me to face Isaac in a judo match, without wanting to boast, I wouldn't really need a lot of boldness. Maybe in 10 years I won't say that anymore but for now facing Isaac wouldn't intimidate me too much. But if you told me that tomorrow I would have to face Teddy Riner, 10 times world champion and 2 times Olympic champion, then I would need a lot more boldness. It wouldn't be the same as facing Isaac at all. The bigger and more formidable the person we are facing, the more boldness we need. And that's the case here in Acts 4. The opposition to the preaching of the Word of God comes from a gathering of the most important and powerful men in Jerusalem. They are the bigwigs of society, the heavyweights, the leaders. We see this in verse 1 and then again in verses 5 and 6: the priests, the commander of the temple, the Sadducees, the chiefs, the elders, the scribes, the high priest Annas, Caiaphas, John, Alexander and all those who were of the family of the chief priest. It's hard to imagine a more intimidating, fearful gathering than this. They are the religious, economic and political leaders, the intellectuals, the nobles. They are rich people, people of influence, people better not to have as enemies. And all, all, are opposed to the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Normally these people hate each other, but there they are ganging up against the name of Jesus. Commentators tell us there were at least 70 people together. 70 of the most powerful men in the land, against two apostles, two former fishermen. Try to imagine these men gathered together. They all wear their official clothes. They all look serious, unhappy. Verses 17 and 21 speak of the threats made to Peter and John. These are men who could hurt the disciples very much.

In verse 7 we read: "They set Peter and John in their midst." Here are these two apostles, surrounded by powerful men, hostile men and very intimidating. Wherever Peter and John look, they see hostile faces. Here are two simple men, two rednecks, fresh from the countryside, surrounded by the 70 most powerful men, the most formidable in society at the time. It is difficult to see how the disciples can come out of this situation unscathed.

It's an angry opposition

It would be terrifying to face Teddy Riner when he is in a good mood, but to face him when he is angry, irritated just after having insulted him, that would be unimaginable. And in this passage, the apostles find themselves, not surrounded by good-humored people, nice people but surrounded by angry people. Verse 2 tells us that these religious leaders are "greatly annoyed". Why so? What bothers them so much? Why do these people oppose the disciples? Why do they want to prevent the disciples from preaching? The text gives us several reasons.

First, we see theological reasons. Look at verse 2. There we see that the Sadducees oppose the teaching of "the resurrection from the dead." The Sadducees do not believe in the resurrection. They don't believe in miracles, in angels, in anything that they can't explain or prove. So they oppose any teaching on the resurrection.

We also see religious and intellectual snobbery and jealousy. In verse 13, Peter and John are described as "uneducated common people." It's as if religious leaders say, "How can people without any formal training, who have no training in a rabbinical school, how can they be so successful? We are educated people, educated people in theology, not them. They are Galileans, not elites like us!" They do not recognize the authority of the disciples. "How is it possible for people like them to do such things?" V7: "by what power or by what name did you do this?" When we read a little further in chapter 5.17 we see that religious leaders are "filled with jealousy".

"Before, the people listened to us. They were following us. They respected us. We are losing our influence. They have 5,000 new followers. We have never had such success." There is jealousy.

There is also a feeling of powerlessness. They get confused because there are things going on that they don't understand, that they can't

manage, things that are beyond their control. There are thousands of people listening to the preaching of the disciples, thousands of people who believe, who follow Jesus and all that in their temple, where they are masters and no one else. These leaders feel threatened by what they cannot manage. What they see is something bigger than them.

But the bottom line, at the heart of their hostility, their opposition, is the content of Peter and John's message. First, they preach the name of Jesus. V10: "let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well." This is a message that is extremely offensive to the ears of religious leaders. Why? Because in this verse Peter says to them: You are mistaken about the person of Jesus. Peter speaks to men who hated Jesus while he was on earth. They had killed Jesus. But despite their best efforts to get rid of Jesus, Jesus is still here, and Jesus seems to be even more powerful and more active than before. "You," said Peter, "you condemned him. You crucified him. But God raised him up. So you, you acted against God. You, you acted against the Messiah of God."

Peter goes even further in verse 11: "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone" You so-called scholars of the Scriptures, you who are trained in the law of God, did not even recognize the cornerstone, the most important stone, the Messiah of God. You killed him.

And then Peter takes it one step further when he tells them that they need to be saved. In verse 12: "Salvation is not found in any other; for there is no other name given under heaven among men, by which we must be saved." Peter preaches salvation in Jesus Christ to men who despise Jesus Christ and who killed him. So in these words of Peter, the sin of religious leaders is exposed. Their heart is exposed and they are furious.

And what provokes their anger even more is that they cannot deny the facts. V16: "A notorious miracle has been performed by them, and we cannot deny it." They would like to deny it, but they can't. V14: "Seeing the man healed, they had nothing to say." They see very well that a miracle has been done in the name of Jesus. They see Jesus at work. In verse 13 they see the assurance of Peter and John and they make the connection with Jesus: "They recognized them for having been with Jesus."

But, instead of accepting what is obvious, instead of accepting their wrongs, instead of humbling themselves and confessing their sin, instead of repenting and kneeling before Jesus, They dig their heels in even more! Instead of crying out: God of Israel, we have killed your son, we are lost, have mercy on us in your grace, instead of being filled with shame and remorse, they are filled with pride, they get angry and deny the obvious truth. Instead of opening their ears to hear the voice of God, they block their ears and stubbornly refuse to believe. The truth is there in front of their eyes. The evidence is there, but deep down they don't want to believe. They can't stand the truth that is so obvious. They refuse to say, we were wrong. They refuse to repent, to change, to kneel before Jesus. Lives changed, they see that. The lame man healed, transformed by the power of Jesus Christ, they see that, but they refuse to submit to Jesus.

And friends, we live in a world just like these religious leaders. We often ask ourselves the question, why in our world is there such hostility to Jesus? Why so much persecution? How do we explain what is happening in North Korea, in China, in Muslim countries? How do we explain the violence against the church, against the people of God. It's not just indifference. It's hostility, violence. And on a personal level, in our families, how can we explain the opposition to our faith, the opposition to Jesus? Why are those close to us often so opposed to our faith? Why do people get angry if we dare to talk about Jesus? Why in France are we told to keep quiet and keep our faith to ourselves?

The answer to these questions lies in the human heart. One author said: The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. In the heart of every human being there is a struggle for power. There is a rejection of the authority of God. There is a raging battle to say no to King Jesus. Jesus is described in the Bible as the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord, he is the Master, the King, the one who reigns. But in our hearts we say "No! I am the master! I'm the king." In William Henley's poem *Invictus* we read these words which perfectly describe the attitude of the human heart towards God: "I am the master of my destiny, I am the captain of my soul." I do not submit to anyone. I do not bow down to anyone. I am on the throne. In 1880 in France, a newspaper was created by the socialist Louis-Auguste Blanqui. He called his journal "Neither God nor Master". Why give this title? Because for Blanqui, he wanted to express the will of the individual not to submit to any political or divine authority.

The religious leaders said: We are the leaders. They couldn't stand that there was someone above them, bigger than them, stronger, more important than them. They couldn't stand that there was someone with more authority than them, someone they had to submit to, and especially not Jesus. And in their pride, human beings continue to reject God and refuse to submit to God. Man, in his sin, in his rebellion against God, refuses to humble himself, to admit his wrongs, to repent and to give everything to Jesus.

I don't know how many times I've seen this in the lives of friends and relatives. They recognize the facts about Jesus. They look at the proofs, the proofs for his death, his resurrection. They see lives transformed by the power of Jesus, they see the Spirit of God at work. They can't deny it. They see the void in their own life. They see the desperation in their own lives. They have no answer to the great questions of existence: Why are we on earth? Why does this world exist? They know they have souls, that they are not just like animals. The Bible tells us that God "even put in their hearts the thought of eternity." They know that this life is not all. But despite all that, despite all the evidence, despite everything that is obvious, everything they know about God, about Jesus, about themselves, they refuse to submit to Jesus. And when we talk to them about their sin, when we talk to them about repentance, when we call them, as Peter does, to come to Jesus to be saved, this message is so offensive to them and they get angry! Try this tonight with your loved ones. In your workplace, tell people about their sin and you will see their anger. Paul says at Romans 8: 7 "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot." This is what happens in Acts 4. This is what is happening in the hearts of those close to you. Here is what is happening in the corridors of power where the rulers of this world are standing up to God. This is what goes on in the hearts of the man and woman on the street.

Here is what may be going on in your heart this morning. You refuse to believe. You refuse to give your heart, your life to Jesus. You know he's alive. You know he is speaking to you but you refuse to come down from the throne of your life to let Jesus reign. He wants to rule. He wants to heal. He wants to forgive and save and you know it but you refuse. You get angry in your heart when someone dares to tell you about your need for a savior. It annoys you. And it annoys you because you know it's true.

Do you know what gives me hope in this scene of unbelief and anger against God? This is chapter 6v7 " And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." The word is preached, the Holy Spirit acts, hard hearts are softened and the enemies of Jesus become disciples of Jesus. This is what God has done for many of us and this is what he will do for you if you repent, humble yourself before him and call on the name of Jesus, for there is no other name given among men, by which you must be saved.