

Speaking the Word boldly

Last Sunday we saw together the reality of opposition to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is preached in Jerusalem. The Kingdom of God is moving forward with power. But there is opposition. There is persecution, a reaction of anger and jealousy on the part of the religious leaders. They can't stand the name of Jesus being preached. They cannot stand that Jesus, the man they killed, that his name be exalted, that the people follow him and believe in him as the Messiah. They don't want to admit that they were wrong, that they were wrong about Jesus and that they should repent and follow Jesus. So what they do is threaten the disciples. Verse 17 and V21. And the disciples understand these threats very well. They know very well what religious leaders are capable of. After all, these are the same religious leaders who put Jesus to death. We can well imagine threats of violence or even death.

So how do the disciples react? What do they do? This is what we want to see this morning. And seeing what the disciples are doing, we want to see what we should do when we are told not to talk about Jesus anymore, when we are told to be silent. We will first see their response to threats and then how such a response is possible.

A confident response

It is immediately evident that the disciples are not intimidated by threats from religious leaders. In verse 7 they are asked, "By what power or by what name did you do this?". It would have been very easy for the disciples to water down their message so as not to upset the religious leaders. Peter could have said, "It was by the name of God that man was healed." This wouldn't have been untrue. After all, Jesus is really God, is he not? Religious leaders would have liked to hear that. They would have nodded approvingly. But what Peter says is not vague or ambiguous. He doesn't mince his words. Peter could not be more frank, more direct in verse 10: "Know it well, all of you and all the people of Israel, It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified and that God raised from the dead, it is through him that this man presents himself in good health before you."

He tells the leaders the truth. "You killed him", "you rejected him", "you must be saved". He gets right to the heart of the matter knowing that the leaders are not going to like the message, that they will probably react badly. Peter knows that the message he is announcing could cost him dearly. He and John are held at the mercy of the most powerful men in the land, men who hate the name of Jesus but that does not prevent them from confidently proclaiming the name of Jesus.

And what's really remarkable here is that the last time we saw the religious leaders gathered like this was to judge and condemn Jesus. And not far from where he is now standing, Peter, questioned among others by a young girl, buckled under the pressure and swore he did not know Jesus. Do you see the transformation? How can we explain that the fearful and intimidated man, who had denied his best friend three times, now announces, fearlessly, with full confidence, the good news of Jesus? What enables Peter to speak with full confidence and what enables us to do the same? What do we see here that we must do ourselves, if we are to bear witness to Jesus?

Why does Peter talk about Jesus in front of religious leaders? Why is he taking what seems like a huge risk? And why do we talk about Jesus to our relatives, to our colleagues, to our neighbors, to the people we meet? Given that our society is largely hostile to the gospel message, why continue to speak it with boldness? Why not just stay quiet? In this passage, I see first two reasons to testify of Jesus and then 4 things that help to do so with confidence. Why do we bear witness to Jesus? There can be all kinds of reasons, but I see 2 in this passage.

Obedience to the Lord.

At the very beginning of this book, Jesus says to his disciples in chapter 1: 8: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem." This is the task that Jesus gives them. Here's what to do in his absence. They are to testify of Jesus, talk about Jesus, preach in the name of Jesus, make salvation known in his name. And they have to start doing it in Jerusalem. And here are the disciples obeying Jesus' command. Witnesses of Jesus, this is their new identity. This is their new purpose in life. They now exist to make Jesus known. They obey the mandate given by Jesus. And that explains what Peter says in verse 19. "Is it right before God that you obey you rather than God?" Religious leaders say we must stop talking about Jesus. Jesus says to talk about him. Who will the disciples obey? And our world tells us to keep quiet. Our world tells us to keep our faith to ourselves. But Jesus tells us "you are my witnesses, proclaiming salvation, the good news." Who are we going to obey? Witnessing to Jesus is a matter of obedience to his Word. He asks us to do it. The world asks us not to do it. Who are we going to obey?

Compassion for others

Let us ask ourselves an important question. What is Peter's motivation when he gives his answer? Of course, he wants to give glory to Jesus. But he does more than that. What is the point of talking about the sin of religious leaders? What is the point of talking to them about salvation? It is clear that Peter has a passion for the name of Jesus, but it is also clear that he cares about the eternal fate of religious leaders. There is in his speech, a compassion for these men who are clearly lost in their ignorance and their sin. Despite the hostility and threats from the leaders, Peter shows compassion and love in proclaiming salvation to them in Jesus Christ. "You killed him. You rejected him. Your sin is very serious, but salvation is offered to you in Jesus Christ. Peter could have stopped at verse 11. He could have spoken words of judgment and condemnation. He could have ended with the bad news. But he presents Jesus, the source of salvation. Peter puts his life in danger so that his enemies can hear the gospel. He takes risks because he wants lost people to turn from their sin and find salvation in Christ. I read an article yesterday written by a pastor in one of the most violent and run-down housing estates in Europe. He said this: "I prove my love for the sinner by showing him how much God hates his sin." In Peter's heart, there is love for these religious leaders. He desires their salvation. If we don't have love and compassion for lost people, even wicked people, even people we see as enemies of the gospel, if we don't have love or compassion for them, if we do not desire their salvation, if we are not convinced of their need, we will never announce the good news of Jesus. Here then are two motivations that we must have to share the good news of Jesus. But what is it about this passage that helps us do it with confidence, with boldness? What strengthens the disciples and what could strengthen us?

A fullness of the Spirit

We are going to see 4 things in these verses which explain the assurance and the audacity of the disciples but it is perhaps what we see in verse 8 which explains it the most: "So Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, says. . ." Here is the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Here is what explains Peter's confidence. He's filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Isn't this what Jesus promises his disciples before he left them? "You will receive power, that of the Holy Spirit coming upon you » (1v8). And time after time in the book of Acts we see people filled with the Spirit. And what happens in most of these cases? It's very simple. Those who are filled with the Spirit, they speak of Jesus. They bear witness to Jesus. They speak confidently. Look at verse 31: "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God with boldness." This is the role of the Spirit. He gives courage to talk about Jesus. When **any** Christian (notice in verse 31 that all were filled with the Spirit) when any Christian is filled with the Spirit, he will speak the Word confidently. We are to seek and pray for the fullness of the Spirit. It is he who allows Peter to speak like this. And the same Spirit helps us too. He works in us to overcome our fears, our shyness. It is the power of this Spirit who created the universe and raised Jesus from the dead that enables you to speak with full confidence. Pray for this fullness. Let us pray that the Spirit will work in us, that God will pour out his Spirit on us. Paul says in Ephesians 5:18, "Be constantly being filled with the Spirit." Constantly submit yourself to the control of the Spirit. Let Jesus rule your life with his Spirit. Listen to him. Live by the Word given by the Spirit. Let this Word dwell in you and permeate every part of your life. And you will find that the Holy Spirit will be at work to help you be a witness for Jesus.

A transformative relationship

If we are surprised by the courage and daring of Peter and John, we must believe that the religious leaders were too. Verse 13: "When they saw the assurance of Peter and John, they were astonished" But it must be said that these religious leaders are not lacking in discernment. Later in this verse: "They saw that they had been with Jesus." The disciples had spent time with Jesus. They had heard his teaching, seen his miracles. They had heard him preach. John had seen him on the cross. Above all, they had seen him resurrected, risen from the tomb and victorious over death. They had spent 40 days with the risen Jesus. This vital relationship with the living Jesus is evident to all. Here is one of the key arguments for the resurrection of Jesus, the impact it has on the disciples. Before seeing him resurrected, what were they like? Scared, intimidated, fearful. They were in hiding for fear that the authorities would come and arrest them too. But that all changes when they see the risen Jesus. He is truly the Son of God. He is truly the Messiah, the Lord. He is worthy of all our trust. We can't talk too much about him. The resurrection of Jesus completely transforms the disciples. Peter himself in verse 20 speaks of Jesus' influence on them: "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." In other words, "We are so marked by the person of Jesus, by his life, his death, his resurrection, Jesus touched our life so that it is impossible for us not to speak of him. We have seen him in all his glory. It's impossible for us not to talk about the one who touched our lives and our hearts so much. Their hearts are overflowing with love for Jesus. The love of Jesus urges them on. Being silent is really not an option. If we are laughed at, it doesn't matter! We have Jesus. If we are insulted, it doesn't matter, we have Jesus to console us. If we are killed, it doesn't matter, we have Jesus to welcome us to him.

Normally, we don't have a hard time talking about the things and people we love, things that we are passionate about: our family, our hobbies, our garden, our home. If we are quick to talk about these things, why are we so slow to talk about Jesus? Take stock of your life. Is it obvious to the world that we have been with Jesus, that we love Jesus above all else? Has your life really been transformed by the Risen Jesus? Do others hear Jesus when you speak? Can the world see Jesus in your account on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter? How is our relationship with Jesus? Jesus, is he really your life, as Paul says, or is Jesus an accessory that we take out every now and then? Speaking confidently about Jesus is the fruit of a close relationship, a loving relationship with Him. When Jesus is our supreme treasure in this life, we'll talk about him.

A communion in prayer

In verse 23, Peter and John are released. What do they do now? "They went to their friends". They go to a prayer meeting. They want to be with their brothers and sisters in Christ. They want to encourage them, to pray with them. This is their first instinct. And the group's first instinct, what is it? It is to pray (v24) "When they heard it, with one accord they lifted up their voice to God". This is the church model we need to follow, a church where we share our testimony in the world together. We talk about the opportunities we have to talk about Jesus. We ask for news: "How did it go, the conversation with your friend, with your colleague? I prayed for it. How did that go? We ask others to pray for us and for the people we talk to about Jesus. We pray for a brother or sister in Christ who is persecuted for their faith, in their family, in their workplace. We pray for the calendars that we will distribute. We are in soldiers in a spiritual war and we need each other. We need fellowship in prayer and this gives us confidence. I am not alone. I have my brothers and sisters praying for me.

We pray that God will give us assurance, as in verse 29: "Grant to your servants to speak your word boldly." They could have prayed that God would intervene to stop the persecution, that God would bring them out of Jerusalem. But no! They pray that God will help them continue to speak confidently.

Trust in God and in his Word.

I wish I could spend more time looking at this prayer with you. It is simply magnificent. But what jumps out at us in this prayer are two things, first absolute confidence in the sovereignty of God and second, confidence in the Word of God. Both of these things help a disciple of Jesus to testify with confidence. The first word of this prayer reveals confidence in a God who is sovereign over all things: "Sovereign Lord" This word is rarely used in the New Testament and it is from this Greek word that the word "despot" comes, which designates an absolute master whose authority no one can dispute. They could have started their prayer with "Heavenly Father" but they choose to say "Sovereign Lord". In the middle of persecution, they find comfort, encouragement to stand firm in the absolute sovereignty of God. They describe God in verse 24 as the God "who made the sky, the earth, the sea, and all that is in them." You created all things and you rule over all things, including these religious leaders. I think that the disciples who pray are thinking of Psalm 146 where we find these same words. We read it earlier. This psalm speaks not only of the God who created everything but also of the God who upholds the oppressed, who releases the prisoners, who frustrates the path of the wicked, who will reign eternally.

The believers see the sovereignty of God even in the death of Jesus. Jesus was not a victim of the wicked who were too strong for him. He was not a victim of circumstances beyond his control. If the rulers of the peoples united against God and against Jesus, it was (v28) "To do whatever (God's) hand and council had determined in advance." God was even using his enemies, to accomplish exactly what he had determined in advance. And if the Christian is to face hostility, threats, even violence, the Sovereign God knows it. The Sovereign God is not taken aback. The sovereign God does not feel threatened and he knows exactly what is going on. He accomplishes all that his hand and his counsel have already determined. If God created all things, that means he created the people who threaten you. If God is powerful to create heaven and earth, will he be powerless to help his persecuted children? Will he be powerless to help us bear witness to Jesus? And the proof that God is sovereign and that God is doing his will is that God, in his Word, had already predicted what was to happen. The Word of God had already predicted everything, the opposition of religious leaders, the death of Jesus. God predicted it. Psalm 2 is cited in the prayer in verses 25 and 26 and this psalm explains exactly what is going on here, a world in rebellion against God and against his Messiah. The Word of God explains our world. It explains the hostility and opposition to Jesus. It's preparing us for it. It gives us a framework for understanding why we need assurance and why we can be sure that God will give it to us through his Spirit. Let us then strengthen ourselves by the Word to speak the Word. What do we find when we open the Word of God? John 16.33 "You will have to suffer in the world, but take heart: I have overcome the world." This is what Jesus says will happen to his church. Because of what the Word tells us, when difficulties and opposition arise, there is no panic. We do not wring our hands in despair. We are not tossed about by waves of hostility. Strengthened by the Spirit, strengthened by the Word, we put our trust in God and we speak the word with boldness.

Dear friends, I end with a few questions. Let's take some time to think carefully about our answer: Does our world need to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ? Did Jesus give us the task of announcing it? Do we want to obey Jesus? Do we love Jesus? Do we love our neighbor, even our enemy? Does the love of Jesus constrain us? Do we really want to see the salvation of the lost? Are we willing to take risks to make Jesus known? Are we ready to commit to praying and encouraging ourselves in this task? I can't answer those questions for you. But I can answer these questions: Do we need boldness because we are often fearful? Yes! Does God promise to help us? Yes! Does he promise to give us his Spirit? Yes! Is God sovereign over every conversation, every opportunity to testify, is he doing his will? Yes. Is God mighty to save. Yes. May God give to us, his servants, to speak his Word with all boldness.