

Roy's sermon for Sunday 6 December 2020

Acts 4:23-31 'God is Shaking the World'

Last week we looked at Acts 4:12 – 22 'A Cripple Set Free: part 6: These Men Had Been With Jesus'. After speaking about who Jesus was and is through vs 1 to 10, and then in v11 accusing them of being the builders who had rejected "the stone which has become the capstone", he then rammed home the point in v12 "there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved". Verse 13 tells us that they were so taken aback by the courage and ability of these 'nobodies', these fishermen, that "they took note that these men had been with Jesus." Nothing made sense about the conduct of these two men. The only thing they could put it down to was "that these men had been with Jesus", because like them, He too was an ignorant commoner, and yet, "He spoke as one who had authority."

These evil religious elite believed that they had put an end to this movement when they had killed Jesus. And yet in these two men who stood before them His Spirit and Message lived! They couldn't deny the miracle because the evidence stood before them in v22. But in attempt to put an end to Jesus' Truth they warned them in v18 and further threatened them in v21. Yet in vs 19 to 20 Peter basically says you can do to us what you will, we can't help but testify to the truth about Jesus. What we have seen with our eyes and heard with our ears. Verse 19 "you judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God."

Yes "these men had been with Jesus." Christ so shone through these two men that the thing which so marked them, was that they had been in the presence of God! And I explained that that's who we need to be. Be in His Presence with His People. In His Presence in His Word. And in His Presence in prayer! And that's where we pick up our Walk Through Peter's Life With Jesus, An Ordinary Man Serving An Extraordinary God. Acts chapter 4 vs 23 - 31 God Is Shaking The World. V23 "on their release they went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them."

Now friends, the first thing we learn here is really quite interesting. Remember, only moments before, Peter and John were on trial before the Jewish ruling elite. And who were Peter and John? Well of course they too were Jews. Yet here it says "on their release they went back to their own people." Now whether or not Luke actually intends this as he writes I'm not sure. But what really speaks clearly to me here is of that other worldliness, about the people of Jesus!

Mark ch10 vs 28- 30 we read: "Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you". "I tell you the truth", Jesus replied, "No one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive 100 times as much in this present age homes , brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields, and with them, persecutions and in the age to come eternal life." Can you see? Peter and John were Jews living in the centre of the universe if you were a Jew. And yet they were aliens, even as people from another planet, living in that land. They had left all behind to follow Jesus. They may not have literally left their parents, family and friends behind never to see them again, (although certainly that is true of some people's experience), but they had turned their backs on their past lives of living for self, and had committed their futures to living for Jesus, come what may. Be it dungeons or daylight, perils or victories.

The great old hymn we sing, Guide me O thou great Jehovah Pilgrim through this barren land. I am weak but Thou art mighty hold me with Thou powerful hand. Friends, as hard as it is for us to lay

hold of in our modern western world with all of its scientific and medical breakthroughs and conveniences, there should be within our hearts a real sense of alienation. That feeling of being 'not of this world'. Of just passing through on our way to our real home of heaven. In many ways the values and goals of this world should seem foreign to us. That character and Spirit of God that has been poured into us through Jesus should be offended by the directions which the world is heading in. Yes we are pilgrims in a barren land, we are just passing through!

Have you ever been in a place, even another part of the world, and met people which you have never seen before and yet it feels like you have known them all your life? That's what Jesus means in the Mark passage. There is a family, there is a country, and a people wherever we go because we are all "looking forward to a city whose architect and builder is God." Hebrews 11:10 tells us: "on their release they went back to their own people." Who like them, (and indeed like us), were on their pilgrimage to meet the King! And the next thing which comes out of this verse is that although God had done a mighty miracle through them, the reason why they were heading "back to their own people", was because like us, they too needed the encouragement and support of the brethren. Their own family in Christ.

You know, Satan will have us believe that we can all do it on our own. That there is no need for fellowship. No need to get together to encourage and support one another as we worship and praise God. That we could even go off and live on some mountain somewhere and call ourselves Christian. I've met people like that over the years. They call themselves Christian and yet they feel no need for Christ or His people. But as it has been said, if you have no need for Jesus and His People in this life, you may well find yourself without them in the next! Christianity is not a solitary life. The Bible describes Jesus' Church as His Body, and with Him being the head. And also of Him being the bridegroom, and the church His Bride. You cannot be part of His Body and be part of His Bride if you have no part in His People.

Yes Peter and John went straight back "to their own people", so that they could encourage the brethren and be encouraged by the brethren themselves, by telling them what God had done and also what the religious elite had said and done to them. And what was it that they would have shared with the believers, (most likely in that meeting place where God's Spirit was first poured out upon them), yes what was it that the two men spoke of to "their own people"? No doubt of the crippled man who had been healed, but also it seems, of all the warnings and the threatenings which they had received from the Jewish elite. Yes even the very eldership of Jewish ruling society and the recognised church of the day!

The Bible commentator Matthew Henry explains that it was good for the men to do this so the believers would know what to expect from both God and man. For men it would be difficulties persecutions, battles, even wars. But from God, it would be victory! Though Satan send his legions against us in the form of the evil powers that be, or in difficulties within the enmity and alienations from family and friends and society itself it matters not. It matters not because through Christ, we have the victory. Praise God!

So first we have the report from the two men and now we have the believer's response. And it is amazing but also instructive. Beloved, ask yourselves: what is the first thing you do when difficulties arise? If you are anything like me it might go something like this: 'I knew this was going to happen. What am I going to do now?' Whereas, (while I'm running around like a chicken with its head cut off), my wife will say, 'Now hang on, let's pray about this'. And that's exactly what we have here before us in v22: "When they heard this they raised their voices together in prayer to God." The commentator explains that it is not that they collectively burst forth in the *same words*, but as we do

in church someone prays on our behalf, and then we all *give our affirmation* to those prayers by saying Amen! So having listened to everything the men had reported, someone prays on the behalf of the believers. And what prayer it is. As he begins: "Sovereign Lord, you created the heaven and the earth." The older translation says: "Lord, thou art God, you created all things." The word used here for Sovereign in Greek is despota. It is that word from which we get the word despot, which has a terrible connotation today. It brings with it the idea of a murderous tyrant, such as Saddam Hussein, Robert Mugabe, Idi Amin, Putin, The Chinese and the North Korean demigods today, just to mention a few. But in light of who the prayer addresses, listen to how the odd Collins dictionary defines the word despotism: 'The absolute power of one who rules unlimited by constitution . One who rules with unimpeded authority.'

Now again, if that describes a man we are in deep trouble. But if that be describing God, then it is an apt description. For God's power is unimpeded. He is beholden to no one. He rules with absolute power and authority. He is bound by no one or no-thing. "I Am Who I Am", God said. I Am God and there is no other. No, He is bound only, (if we can even put it this way), by the righteousness of His Character in that He can do no wrong, and also by the eternal integrity of His Word, which He does not break!

Yes "Sovereign Lord", of You there is no equal. "You made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them." So the prayer acknowledges that God is not only the Ruler but also the Creator of the entire universe and everything in it! Speaking of Jesus, in Colossians ch1 v15-20 we read "He is the image of the invisible God, the first born over all creation. For by Him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church, He is the beginning and the first born from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross."

So not only were all things created through Jesus, but in Him the entire universe is held together! It has been said if Christ were to turn His Face away from the universe for only a moment, it would cease to be. Yes Father, Son and Holy Spirit: He is God and there is no other. And as the man prays on behalf of them all, he acknowledges: What can mere man do to us? There is no thing which is beyond God's reach and outside of His Plan. If He made all things then nothing is hidden from His Sight!

In 1 Kings 18:36-39, after Elijah had challenged the hundreds of idolatrous prophets of Baal to a contest as to whose God really was God, and after a whole day and evening of those prophets calling out to their dead god of stone and slashing themselves in their frenzied attempts to get their lump of stone to act, Elijah basically says, step aside. And we read 1 Kings 18:36-39 "At the time of sacrifice, the Prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that You, O Lord, are God, and you are turning their hearts back again." Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell on their faces and cried the Lord, "He is God. The Lord, He is God." Yes "The Lord He is God. The Lord, He is God." Yes "Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them (v25) you spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant David."

Do you remember 2 Timothy ch3 v16: "all scripture is God breathed." Not merely the recollections or speculations of men, but the very breath of God. The words breathed into them by the Holy Spirit." You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant David, why do the nations rage and the peoples put in vain? The Kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gathered together against the Lord and against His Anointed one." Prophetically speaking of Jesus, David wrote these things 1000 years before our Lord was born. It speaks of the ongoing battle against God and His Kingdom, finding its culmination so to speak, at the cross of Jesus. And yet in this prayer the people acknowledge that though Jesus has gone to the cross and won the victory, the battle continues still, because the Kings and the nations continued to "Rage against God and against His Anointed one." The people of the early church saw in this attack upon Christ's Message as preached by the apostles, a direct link to the attack upon Christ Himself. And again, from the recognised Church of the day no less.

Friends, it is no different today . There are brethren around the world today who are literally being beaten, imprisoned and put to death for their faith. In our own nation today, so much of that which we hold dear, the sanctity of life and marriage, The God given order of things of right and wrong; That it is His right and His right alone to give life and to take it; The accountability for one's own actions and with the expectation that failure to abide by the law of the land, would be upheld within the courts. And yes today,(even as we know), the evil madness , which has gripped our land that you are not born male or female as God made you, but you will decide what you are in your own good time. And friends ultimately in increasing measure, the freedom to serve and worship God in the way and manner which He Himself has prescribed in His infallible Word the Bible, is being taken away from us. Yes all of these things are being attacked, because the Kings and the powers that be and the nations continue to "rage and gather together against the Lord and His Anointed One." Embodied in His Church! Satan and his legions find the target of their rage, in the true Church of Jesus Christ. God's Own Anointed Son! And the man who prays, clearly acknowledges that what took place at Jesus' trial and death was the fulfilment of what David prophesied, 1000 years before!

Listen as his prayer continues v21 "indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed." Now when you think of it, who was he describing? It was describing "the rulers, the authorities and the nations" and the then supposed people of God. So in his prayer he acknowledges that the whole world of humanity, raises it's fist in defiance and rebellion against God and His Anointed Son Jesus Christ. And he leaves no one out. That is why Grace is so crucial to the message of the gospel. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.

But notice what he says next which sheds light on it all. v28 "they did what your power and will had decided before should happen." Friends, in this verse we are confronted with that unanswerable question: Where does the Sovereignty of God end, and the responsibility of men for their actions begin? Well humanly speaking, it is unanswerable, because only God knows, as one is intertwined with the other. But here we can see that God had decided. That there was a decision which had taken place in the eternal council and plan of His Will. God had decided before the world began, that Jesus must suffer and die for His People to be set free from the bondage and consequences of sin. But this "decision" of God, does not excuse us from the responsibility of our actions. We must come in repentance and submission to Him to be set free. Yes though this all be God's eternally decided and predetermined plan, we are still all responsible for Jesus' death and will one day each of us, give an account of our lives to God, for that part which we played, in His Son's death! Romans 1:20 "so that men are without excuse."

And as I mentioned earlier, “the Kings and the Rulers and the nations continue to rage”. As we can see in the text before us, and in the reality of our world today. And though they can't lay hands on our Lord, they do the next best thing. They attack His beloved bride, His church! “But they did what your power and will had decided before hand should take place.” What's he saying? Father in heaven even the great powers of the world are simply tools in your hands. These things didn't happen by chance. Your Plan has not failed. Indeed, all of this is Your will being done. And then in this prayer he calls God as his witness to the world of enmity against the true church. And he asks that such things would not deter them. But in them that they be strengthened all the more! V29 “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.” Notice he says, “consider their threats.” He doesn't say don't worry about them. He doesn't say disregard them or overlook them. He says, “consider their threats.” Or in other words, keep their threatenings in mind O God. Remember their threats against your People. Remember their threats against your servants and in Your time O Lord, bring down upon their heads a price to pay!

In Matthew ch.25 v31 to 46 (where Jesus speaks of the sheep and the goats), we learn how personally, Jesus takes the way His people are treated. He even holds to account, those who have failed, when given Providence, to do good to His People. Beloved, in the face of the opposition from the world, what should we do? Pray, that God would enable us “to speak His Word with great boldness.” We are constantly reminded in the scriptures that God never leaves us. That He always watches over us. And that “even the hairs of our head are all numbered.” “That all the days of our lives were written in his book before one of them came to be.” And that “He carries us on eagle's wings.” And that when the time comes for us to speak in His Name we shouldn't worry about what we're going to say because “He will put his words in our mouth.” But as I said last time we should pray, for Providence to speak for wisdom to do so, and as it says here, “boldness” to speak. This is why we are here Beloved. Each of us in our own way is a warrior for Christ's gospel.

This section closes in verse 31 with this amazing affirmation from God, that He had indeed heard their prayer. “After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.” Friends, notice what they received from God. Exactly that for which they had prayed. Because their desire was that Jesus' gospel would not be stifled. That it would not be silenced. But would, (in the face of the rising opposition and attack from all sides), be proclaimed from the rooftops all the more as it were. “They spoke the word of God boldly.” And notice also what God does. Because I believe there is in this great symbolism. “The place where they were meeting was shaken.” Beloved, I have no doubt, that God is telling us all, that in the same way that the building where the believers met was shaken, that with the preaching of the gospel, He was going to shake the whole world. And He continues to do so to this very day, and will keep doing so until Jesus returns! Yes the world continues to be shaken. It is being shaken as a whole, by the gospel. But also, each person's world is shaken as the gospel takes hold of them and shakes them unto eternity! Friends, let us pray that God would continue to shake us. And let us also pray, that He would use us to shake the worlds of those whom we love with His gospel of life while the door of His Mercy through Jesus is still open!