

The courage to speak up

Acts 4:1-31

We wonder if it's maybe time for a new approach. I've been talking with the Leadership Team of the church, and we think maybe the way that we encourage us all to relate to the world around us needs to change.

Instead of persisting with this 'you need to tell other people about Jesus' thing, we think it's maybe better if you don't. Of course we should hold on to our beliefs about Jesus living, dying and rising again. But trying to talk about this with a world who doesn't believe it or want to know it is beginning to seem unhelpful.

All it can lead to is trouble - tense relationships with people, and in this day and age we're just heading for nasty brushes with the law if we keep going the way we've encouraged you up until now. The message is increasingly offensive actually - we're telling people that they're in the wrong if they don't recognise their need for Jesus. And that He's the *only* way to true life.

So rather than encouraging you to speak up about Jesus, we're going to encourage you to keep quiet. Let's just believe what we do, and see what happens with everyone else. Anything else is asking for trouble we don't really want.

Actually, we want to go a little further than that. If anyone keeps speaking about people's *need* for Jesus and about Jesus being the *only* way, and it draws attention and gets us in trouble, we're going to have to take a firm line about it. We'll ask you to stop speaking out like that, or else to leave the church. It sounds harsh, I know, but if our church is going to survive in these days where there's increasing hostility to what we believe about Jesus, we really need to stop making a noise.

So our message is changing from 'speak to people more about Jesus' to, 'let's stop speaking about Him with those who aren't already here.'

What do you feel about this new approach?

Perhaps what you heard there left you feeling enormously relieved... the pressure you've felt about talking to others about Jesus lifted. Or maybe you felt alarmed or even angry... because this is just the opposite of what living out the gospel, the 'telling of good news' is. I imagine most of you were quite aware that I couldn't possibly have meant any of that.

Everything I've just shared with you is, of course, about the furthest thing from what I and the Leadership Team of this church really want to say as you can get. With Peter and John in Acts 4, we want to say to you, 'Speak up!' Speak up for Jesus, and make a noise. Tell people of their need for Him, and His uniqueness as the One person who can make life infinitely fuller.

But if you were concerned or indignant about that pretend new line from the leadership, let me ask you this - does your actual practice as a Christian match more with the real call of this church to 'go and speak up,' or the fake one I sketched out to 'keep quiet and draw less attention'? It's time to be the church that we really believe in.

The line I pretended was the Leadership Team's is actually the line taken by the ecclesiastical authorities in Acts 4. The Sanhedrin, the chief religious leaders - *they* were the ones saying 'stop talking about Jesus. Stop it, or there will be consequences.' They were the ones worried about losing their beloved religious community. I don't think we want to be more like them than we are like Peter and John, do we?

The Church in the West doesn't need more teaching, it needs more courage. Courage to go when God says go, and to stay when God says stay. Courage to stand out and be noticed for our ability and our integrity, as we looked at last week. *And courage to speak up about Jesus!*

Peter and John spoke up about Jesus with courage. A few weeks ago Will helped us to see how Peter speaking up in Acts 2 took enormous courage. He said it was like a Rangers fan turning up to a Celtic AGM with the message 'Guys, you've got it all wrong, you're supporting the wrong team - you need to switch to following the Gers.' Already some of you are angry...

Well, that's what it was like in these early chapters of Acts. Peter and John are going round telling Jewish people on their own patch in Jerusalem that they are in error and they need to change direction. That they killed Jesus, and now they need to realise that Jesus rose to life and they've got to follow Him instead. This is a message positively inviting trouble.

And this time, trouble accepts the invitation. In v.3, we read that Peter and John are seized and thrown into prison for this message. In vv.17-18, they're dragged before the Sanhedrin - Annas, Caiaphas & co - and they're told bluntly, 'Stop talking about Jesus.' When you're standing in the same spot

that Jesus stood, being told to stop by the same men who pronounced the death sentence on Jesus, you know they're not just asking politely.

And in v.21, we read about 'further threats.' We don't read what they are, but we can safely assume it's more sinister than a slap on the wrist. And it's 'threats,' plural. Peter and John are repeatedly threatened, with the aim of getting them to buckle.

But the thing that stands out is the immovable courage of Peter and John - not only to speak about Jesus where it leads them into trouble like this, but also to refuse to stop speaking when the trouble lands. They just will not keep quiet about Jesus!

And here's the message they are courageously speaking:

'You killed Jesus.' (v.10)

'God raised Jesus.' (v.10)

'You need to be saved by Jesus, and Him alone.' (v.12)

The same three themes are there in Peter's preaching in chapter 2, and again in chapter 3.

I don't think the reason we're not speaking about Jesus with those who don't follow Him is that we don't know what to say. The message is not too complicated to remember or put into our own words. Jesus has come to be King. People are rejecting Him - killing Him off from their attention - and they're wrong to do so. God has broken sin and death by raising Jesus to life.

And the response to make to all this is to 'repent' - to change your mind about rejecting Jesus, receive forgiveness for everything that put Him on the cross, and believe in His name as the One King and Rescuer who brings life to the full, now and forever.

If you believe all this news, it's because you know it. And if you know it, you can tell it. The reason we don't speak it out more I think is that it's *hard* to say it. It takes courage; courage we've been lacking.

We'll come to learning from Peter and John's courage in a minute. But there's one other reason I think we don't speak of Jesus more. We can't imagine the context in which we would. We hear at church, 'Talk to other people about Jesus,' and we think, 'yes - that's what I should do. But how would this come up?' Where and when do we get a platform to speak?

What are the situations in your day-to-day life where conversations about Jesus have happened? (Invite feedback).

As our church heads towards forming monthly missional communities after the summer, our aim and hope and prayer is that these are places where we can intentionally start conversations about Jesus as we share work, rest and play with others who are happy to join us in various shared activities. There's one place we can do this.

There might be various platforms you get to speak up about Jesus. It could be a microphone. It could be an online chatroom. It could be a fireside discussion with a drink in your hand. The bottom line is, many of us feel like we miss the train on the opportunities God gives us. Let's stop kicking ourselves. But let's also start grabbing and making the most of the opportunities that do come up, when people's attention is suddenly drawn.

That's what Peter and John do. When people's attention is drawn because God just breaks in to do something noticeable like in Acts 2, with the Holy Spirit causing God's people to speak different languages. When attention is drawn because people notice a ministry changing lives and they ask, 'How is *that* possible?' like in Acts 3 when a crippled man gets healed (a guy who is *over 40* no less! What a write off...)

When attention gets drawn because Christians are called to account for living in ways that defy the society or even the law around them. They don't try to get off the hook. They try to speak some more about Jesus.

'If we are being called to account for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.'

How do we speak courageously when people are ready to give us that attention? Well, I think Acts 4 shows us that the courage to speak up comes when we start asking more. Four things to ask for stand out in the passage.

First, there's literally asking God for boldness to speak about Jesus! In v.29, after the church have laid out before God all the threats and opposition they've faced, they ask not for it all to be taken away, but that God would 'enable your servants to speak your word for great boldness.' I wonder how

often you've ever asked God for that? I know after today that's going to have to become a new priority in my prayer life.

Secondly, there's asking God to fill us with His Holy Spirit. In Acts 2, Peter speaks up with new boldness and ability when the Holy Spirit fills the disciples. In 4:8, we read that Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit, before he starts speaking up about Jesus. In 4:31, we read that after they had prayed, '...they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.'

In Acts, this 'filling with the Holy Spirit' happens when a Christian is about to face a special challenge. Maybe the reason we're not experiencing more of that is because we're not adventuring into challenging places with our witness. And maybe the reason is, because we're not asking for it. Why don't we ask God if He will fill us with the Holy Spirit, and see what bold and able witness comes as a result?

Thirdly, there's asking God to do such things amongst us that we couldn't *help* but speak with courage and passion and excitement! In v.20, whilst Peter's saying 'no' to the threatening men telling him to stop talking, he says, 'we can't help it! What we've seen... what we've heard... there's nothing we can do *but* talk about it!'

Some of you know this feeling. You had it when you first became a Christian, and you were so excited by what was happening to you that it poured out of you. You had it when you had some incredible experience of God's power once or maybe twice in your life. You had it when a miracle happened in your experience. So speaking up about Jesus wasn't a choice, it was an inevitability.

Peter and John had seen Jesus die. And they had seen Him raised to life. They had looked at each other and their friends when they started speaking the languages of other nations without a day in the classroom. They had seen a crippled man (*over 40!*) stand up and jump around with joy. They had seen amazing things in Jesus.

Why don't we ask, like these guys do in v.30 along with their prayer for bold speaking, for amazing things? For God to do such things among us of healing and power and renewal that we couldn't help but natter on about it endlessly? Why not ask? Expecting little, we ask little. But expecting that God could do more, much more... let's just *ask*, shall we?

Those three things - asking for boldness to speak, asking to be filled with the Holy Spirit, asking for God to do wonderful things worthy of speaking about - those are all things to ask of God. The fourth thing to ask is of one another.

It's this - will you come with me? Acts 3 and 4 was Peter *and* John. Side by side, through it all. Making each other brave. Keeping each other faithful. Will you come with me, as I invite my friend to church next week? Will you come with me, and we'll go to this debate together? Will you come with me, and start this missional community where we can speak of Jesus?

Who could you ask in this church family, or another one, to be side by side with you where you're going to be bold speaking about Jesus?

Let's finish up by looking at what happens when we Christians have the courage to speak up about Jesus. First of all, when we do, people *have* to consider Jesus. In v.13 we read, 'When they saw the *courage* of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.'

You don't have to be a specially trained evangelist to get people thinking about Jesus. Actually, if you're not that kind of person, but you're speaking up about Him, that gets people thinking even more. I know that when I've been bold and taken that chance to speak of Jesus with people, I've seen that look on their faces... that, 'this has put the name of Jesus in my mind and now I'll need to consider that' look, more than once.

And when people consider Jesus and His message - you've rejected Him, He's broken sin and death, you need Him and Him alone to be rescued - two responses inevitably follow. There's opposition. Acts 4 is the first chapter that narrates resistance to the good news the church brings. Court, prison, threats... there's much more to come throughout the book. And I suspect there's much more to come in our society too.

But the flip side is this... there's faith. People coming to faith in Jesus. Thousands and thousands of them in Acts - hearing, believing, being saved. As Christians speak boldly of Jesus, there will be growing opposition. But there will also be a growing number of people coming to faith in Jesus.

Which brings us back round to the reason for this whole series on courage. 'The Church in the West doesn't need more teaching, it needs more courage.' The Non-Western Church is demonstrating that. In so many nations and

cultures, Christ's people are facing real opposition. But those are the places where thousands of people are coming to faith in Jesus too.

Do you long for a Church where thousands of people are coming to faith in Jesus? If so, you're longing for a Church that's going to face difficult opposition too - worth knowing that now. Or do you long instead for a church whose leadership says, 'Keep quiet and be respectable?' and where there's basically no opposition? I guess the measure of that will be in what you ask God for, and whether you ask someone to draw alongside you to speak up.

(Mention Matt Chandler book - two key points:

- We're being pushed to the margins, but the Church has always thrived most there
- Keeping in mind the big story - Christ's true Lordship, victory, redemption

It is time for us to have courage, church. To speak up about Jesus. Let's ask God for boldness to speak. Let's ask Him to fill us with His Holy Spirit. Let's ask Him to do things amongst us that we can't help but tell people about. And let's ask one another to be side by side with us in places where we can speak of Jesus. And let's look with expectancy for what'll happen next.