

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EASTER: APRIL 18th
Acts 5:27b-41; John 21:1-19

Notes to Acts 5:27b-41

- In verse 28 we see the Sanhedrin expressing their concern that blame for the death of Jesus is being directed towards them.
- The Sanhedrin was the supreme Jewish council made up of seventy-one members and it had legislative, executive and judiciary functions. Its powers differed from time to time depending on politics.
- Peter's defence is clear (vs 29): he immediately states his overriding principle in his ministry that he must at all times obey God. Then he launches immediately into a proclamation of the kerygma (kerygma = the fundamental teaching of the apostles which in this case is that Jesus was crucified, that he was buried in the grave and that he rose again sending the Holy Spirit upon them for the forgiveness of sins) the very thing he had been told not to do.
- The expression *hanging him on the tree* brings to mind the statement in Deut 21:23 *cursed be everyone who hangs upon a tree*.
- V.31 – this picks up a key theme of Luke, that of the forgiveness of sins through Jesus who is saviour. But this forgiveness is linked to repentance.
- The Sanhedrin are *enraged* and want to *tear him apart*. The Greek word means more than just kill him. It is suggestive of the anger and outrage that these spiritual leaders have at Peter's proclamation of the kerygma.
- The Pharisee Gamaliel helps set out just how the Jewish leaders were to deal with the fledgling Church community.
- The Pharisees came to the fore during the exile when the temple was gone and the only thing that held the people together was the Torah, the Book of the Law. The Pharisees taught the law and interpreted the Law and thus enabled the identity of the people to survive the exile. Upon their return to Jerusalem the temple was rebuilt and the priesthood re-established. These priests drew to themselves the role of interpreting the Law and saw themselves as having the ultimate say in determining what was in accord with the Law and what was not. Thus, in post-exilic Judaism there was a built in conflict between those who saw the Temple as being at the centre of their religion and those who saw the Torah as being at the centre and this conflict continued on into the time of Jesus and the early Church.
- Gamaliel suggests that they can let Peter and the others go, for if the movement is from God it will survive. If it is from men then it will fail. This is a theme found in the teaching of Rabbi Sandalmaker: *Any assembling together that is for the sake of heaven shall, in the end, be established, but any that is not for the sake of heaven shall not in the end be established (Pirke Aboth 4:11)*.
- Luke has a nice note in verse 39 where he notes that the Sanhedrin listened to Gamaliel. Back in 5:29 Peter insisted that *obedience to God comes before obeying men* and here the Sanhedrin is listening not to God but to a man.
- Verse 41 has the worrying (from a comfort point of view) note that they were *glad to have had the honour of suffering humiliation for the sake of the name*.
- The preached that *the Messiah was Jesus*. It is important to make sure that we translate the name *Christ* and not leave it as a kind of second name for Jesus. For Luke, the key message is that this Jesus whom they killed is in fact the

messiah promised by God. The word Christ is the Greek word for the messiah.

Here in the story from Acts we have, sadly, an all too familiar theme – conflict. Our Church is filled with such conflicts and in many way the Church of today grew out of such suffering and also the martyrdom that such conflicts brought about. Sadly, conflict is not always something imposed on the Church from outside. We seem to have a wonderful ability to generate our own internal conflicts as well.

At this stage in the history of the Church the Christians they were still very much a sect within Judaism and their problems were that the traditional religious institutions and structures, with their power bases and political intrigues was not able to open themselves up to the possibility of God doing something new and creative in their time. They were under threat and they responded by striking out at this group that they must have seen as a small but worrying sect.

In some ways it is ironic to read the reactions of the Pharisees for they themselves began as a response to a new situation in Judaism. The Temple was gone and the people were in danger of being absorbed by the dominant cultures all around them. It was the Pharisees who gathered the people of God together around the Torah. They taught the faith, they showed that God did not need a Temple in order to be with his people and that the people did not need a building in order to worship God. In their time they represented a radical departure of what had been established over centuries of war, suffering and endurance. Now in this story from Acts they are presented as being a part of the establishment and they seem to be unable to see that perhaps God was taking his people along a new path, with new possibilities. That under the power of the Holy Spirit they were being called to be a part of a new creation. All they seemed to worry about was their own loss of power and privilege.

Peter's main message was that Jesus is the messiah for whom they had hoped and prayed from the time of the prophets of old. He believed this because God had revealed it to him. He preached that Jesus was their leader and their saviour, that he came so that sins could be forgiven and so that men and women could be once again made one in God. They were witnesses to this. There is a definition of what the Church is! The Church is the community of believers whose lives are a witness to the salvation that is on offer from God in Jesus Christ. In this sense, Peter is not just talking about the content of his preaching. He is talking about a salvation that can be seen, felt and shared through a participation in the lives of the disciples. He did teach the faith but much more importantly, he and the other disciples lived the reality of the Kingdom and it was this experience of the risen Lord that came through the pattern of their lives that convinced people of the truth of their teaching.

One of the really sad things about this story is how Luke describes the Sanhedrin. They are *full of envy (5:17) and rage*, an anger that will eventually lead them to planning a murder (5:33). They have moved so far from godly living and are so consumed by their own importance and their own positions of power that in response to Peter's preaching about the forgiveness of sins, they plan his death and the death of the followers of Jesus. It is a wonderful example of what anger can do to people, how it can consume them and pervert the very things they hold near and dear.

Gamaliel seeks to marginalize Jesus by putting him into the same class as other rebels, men who had risen up against the rulers of their time. He is just one more criminal. When these rebels were killed their followers were scattered and he reassured his fellow Sanhedrin members that this would be the case with Jesus. But he cannot see how wrong he is. Yes, Jesus was a prophet and he was killed but he has now risen and far from being scattered his followers are being gathered together by the Holy Spirit and are growing in numbers!

Like the Pharisees during the lifetime of Jesus, Gamaliel has rejected the plan of God and his fellow leaders are now in a position where Like has them listening to the word of a man rather than to the word of God. They are caught up in human plotting and are deaf to the call of their God. And in the end, apart from a bit of suffering and pain on the part of the apostles, what happens to the plotting and planning of these men? Nothing. They cannot contain the movement of God and the Apostles go out of the hearing and immediately stand preaching and teaching in the Temple. They are empowered and emboldened by the Spirit of God and proclaim Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ of God.

Notes on John 21:1-19

- Many scholars believe that the Gospel originally ended at 20:31 and that chapter 21 was added at a later time by either the evangelist or one of his disciples. It can best be understood as an epilogue, something of significance that rounds off the Gospel.
- The number of disciples is given as seven – a perfect number and meant to suggest that this small community is actually symbolic of the new community of the restored and renewed People of God.
- They catch nothing until they respond to the command of Jesus to fish on the right side of the boat. The actual side does not matter. What they are doing is fishing in response to the command of Jesus. It is obedience that brings the fish and not their fishing expertise.
- The two apostles who were first at the tomb are now the ones who recognise Jesus as the one commanding them to fish.
- Why 153 fish? There are many interpretations of that number but it may simply represent the tradition. In the story that was handed on the number was given as being 153! It does not have to have a mystical meaning.
- The net did not tear, just as the seamless gown of Jesus was not ripped up by the soldiers.
- The story bring together the key theology: At Jesus word the disciples go fishing and they are immensely successful but the nets do not break. We are shown a universal community set up by Jesus and lead by Peter and John. This is the picture of the Church presented by John.

Peter begins today's story by deciding that he is going fishing and invites the others to join him. It would seem that in taking this step he is doing precisely what he was commanded to do (Mark 1:16-20). What is important here is that they fail miserably. They catch nothing! However, when Jesus then commands them to cast their nets out onto the other side of the boat, they are almost overwhelmed by the size of their catch. That about says it all for John. The Apostles (and after them each and every follower of Jesus who is baptized) are the nets used by God to catch souls for the Kingdom. It is God who is the fisherman

and not Peter. The only time the fishing fails is when those casting the nets get themselves into the position of thinking it is all about their efforts and abilities. This is not the way of the Kingdom. Fishing for souls is the work of God and our role is allowing ourselves to be cast out into the deep waters of the world around us. To allow God to fish through us and in us.

How reassuring that is, especially in today's Church when the obstacles seem to be so enormous and threatening. If God does the fishing the nets will be full. When we do the fishing our nets will be empty.

It is also important for John's theology of the Church for him to have the story begin by observing that the disciples *were together*. For him the Church is the new community of God, the community of the cross. This is why it was "they" who went out and not just Peter. They were a gathered community and it was as a community formed and given an identity by the dead and risen Christ that they acted. They went about their task as a single community, whatever of their divisions and differences they acted together, around Peter. And that is what the Church has been called to be down through history. It is a gathered community, a community responding as one in the ongoing mission of Jesus of catching souls for God. If the Church is not a community gathered around the apostles, then it is not the Church, it remains nothing more than an occasional gathering of likeminded people and it will never successfully fill its nets.

John then goes on further to speak about the nature of discipleship. In verse 18 Jesus utters something of a prophecy with regard to Peter. He tells him that *when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands and somebody else will put a belt around you and take you where you would rather not go*. There in a nutshell is the challenge to discipleship. Real discipleship is not about always going to be about going where we would like to go, doing what we would rather do. Real discipleship is going to involve us being bound up by God and dragged in ways that he wants and sometimes along paths we *would rather not go*.

In this way he has shown the difference between the leaders of the Jewish people and the true disciple. It is all too easy to believe when faith demands nothing of us that we do not already comfortably do. We can believe that faith demands greater things of everyone else, of our leaders, of someone else in the parish, but not of ourselves. True faith, however, is going to demand a lot more of us and will keep on demanding more and more of us until the time of our death. True faith is a faith that is built on the cross of Christ and the community in the boat is in fact the community of the cross. It is defined by the cross, by self sacrifice, by self denial, by a willingness to suffer and if necessary to die. There can be no self serving in this community which makes this is the great challenge to discipleship.

Peter's life and death is one that must give glory to God and glory to God alone. As soon as Peter becomes more important, along with his needs and his ambitions and his desires, then the whole thing will fall apart and the nets will remain empty.

Conclusion:

All of our readings today remind us of a central reality: We are called to make ourselves available for the mission of God in the world. That is our overriding vocation, to be nets in the hands of God! This is going to involve hardship and at times suffering. We risk being misunderstood and unfairly judged but in the end God will be victorious through us. This is what keeps us going – we are doing God's work. We will only remain without a successful catch, without fish, when we think that we are here for ourselves, when we become the authors of our own ministries. We are sent by God or we are not sent at all.

And, finally, we do this as a community. The Church has always had small groups like the Pharisees, who get together and plot and plan, who live in fear of change and new directions and who oppose what they fear. But God is always greater and he will never remain subject to the approval of men and women. We are called to be disciples, missionaries and not Pharisees.

In the end, as we move further into this post-easter season, we should be filled with a sense of excitement as God brings his saving light and grace to our lives and to the entire world. Jesus has died. Christ has risen and we all now have a share in that new life. Alleluia!