Courage for Life (and Death)
Acts 5:12-42

We started Acts by asking, how come the one solitary life of Jesus of Nazareth has had the profound impact on humanity that it has? How come, against all the odds, the Christian faith spread from a bunch of dejected, defeated disciples in the back woods of the Roman Empire, to be the world-wide movement that it is today? Because if you lived in first century Jerusalem and were a betting man, you would not have put money on that happening, would you?

And it's all the more remarkable given the intensity of the opposition that they faced. You see the part of Acts that we're in at the moment is really just the start, it's the opening salvos, of a war of persecution that – and if you know your history you'll know this is true - is going to get increasingly intense for the next 300 years – and of course continues for many around the world even today. And yet, despite that persecution, the church just kept on, and keeps on, growing and the gospel kept on spreading.

So how come? What was going on in the lives of these disciples, what's the secret to the triumph of the gospel in the face of adversity and suffering and death? Well, this passage gives us some clues, but as we look at it, we're going to see something that is of more than just historical interest, we're also going to discover the source of an inner courage that we all need. Because it wasn't just the early church who needed courage. Given what life can throw at you, we all need courage, and we all need courage to live life as Christians.

Heroes and Villains
Now reading this account it's striking isn't it, at first glance, how polarized the characters are? You've got the disciples, - the heroes - boldly telling people about Jesus, and you've got the High Priest and his cronies – the villains - threatening and using violence in an attempt to stop them.

But whilst there is this dramatic clash of worldviews and kingdoms going on, Luke paints a much more subtle picture than that, there are more colours to it than just black and white. You see whilst there's no doubt who the heroes are, and where the truth lies, how people respond to that truth – to the gospel - falls across a pretty wide spectrum. And I want us to look at that, because, of course, little has changed today. So let's look briefly at the characters involved.

First up are the apostles. Now if you remember from Acts 4, they have already been threatened by the religious authorities, and told, 'no more talk about Jesus – it's over.' And their response to that was to pray for boldness for themselves on the one hand, and for God to stretch out his hand in healings and signs and wonders on the other. And this passage picks up from that prayer – and we see the apostles bravely and boldly continuing to tell people about Jesus in public, in the temple, and as Luke puts it in v12, 'many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles.'

So despite the threats they were living under, these guys responded to the message of the gospel by risking everything in serving others, and praying for others, and telling others about Jesus.

But then there are 'the others', 'the rest' as Luke calls them in v13 – the average man and woman on the streets of Jerusalem. And their response to the good news of Jesus varied. Sure, as Luke says in v13, 'the people held them [the apostles] in high esteem', as they watched them up close, how they handled people, how they served people, how they taught, these men won their respect, but people varied in how close they would come. Some heard the message, believed it and embraced it, v14: 'and more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.' And in response to the growth of the church and these miracles and the teaching about Jesus, news spread like wild fire and brought people in from the surrounding areas, and they brought their sick to be healed just as they had done with Jesus.

But not everyone believed. Or at least, as Luke puts it in v13, 'None of the rest dared join them.' So whilst many were drawn in, and the church grew to over 10,000, others chose to stand on the side-lines, some maybe just as spectators, others maybe happy to enjoy the healing stuff, and the power and the buzz, but not willing to commit, and still others wanting to keep it all at arms length. There was this respect, that saw what was going on, and refused to diss it, but says 'thank you, respect you, but this isn't for me'. And there's at least a hint of the dilemma people faced, do you join these Christians, or don't you?

And it's interesting isn't it? How nothing much has changed. How the person and work of Jesus, if approached with intellectual honestly, continues to generate those kind of responses.

But whilst the response of the average person was positive, with the worst being a kind of arms length respect, if not awe, the response of the leadership was anything but. And when Luke says in v17: 'But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him,' you can almost feel the tension rising. And the contrast between these authority figures and the apostles is stark. Luke says, they 'were filled with jealousy' (v17). Now, jealousy for what? Isn't it for their authority, their power, and their hold on power. And they see the apostles, these Christians as a threat to that.

So just consider the difference between the apostles and the authorities. One group is seeking to serve others, the other is self-serving. One is spreading the message of life, as the angel puts it in v20, the other is threatening death; one is willing to risk and give up, the other is desperate to hold on. And the latter use their political power to try and squash the gospel by imprisoning the apostles.

However, what is fascinating, is that the High Priest and his crew would have seen things very differently, wouldn't they? If you had asked them, 'in your opinion, who are the heroes and who are the villains here?', they would never have viewed themselves as the bad guys. The villains in their eyes were these Christians – threatening the status quo, threatening the established order, insisting that Jesus was the Messiah, trying to pin responsibility for his death on them, calling people to repentance of their sin that they might find life and forgiveness. That was the crime.

And so here again, little changes, does it? Whilst in the West Christians don't face imprisonment, there is undoubtedly this effort to squeeze the Christian faith from the public square and from the campus, because it has become politically or culturally unacceptable to suggest that Christ is the only way, that our sin was responsible for his death, that there is such a thing as sin that needs to be repented of, and that life and forgiveness can only ultimately be found in Jesus. And so the spirit of the High Priest and his like is very much alive and well and living in the 21st Century west.

And so the example of the High Priests and their handling of the apostles and the good news tells you, that it's ok to find yourself on the wrong side of history. It's ok to be on the receiving end of the harsh words of those in power, because the way God sees things, and the way the cultural elite see things, may be very different. And what matters is not being on the right side of history, but the right side of eternity.

And so the authorities arrest the apostles, and imprison them. But in doing so they find themselves, ironically, powerless to stop them, as an angel delivers them in the night, and the next morning when they go to get them from the prison, they eventually find them already in the temple telling people about Jesus, or, as the High Priest puts it in v28, 'you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching.'

And I don't know about you, but I find the response of the leaders to the gospel deeply sobering. Whilst others respond with respect and faith, they want to protect their own interests and can't even bring themselves to mention Jesus' by name – 'this name', or 'this man' they call him, and when told the gospel again by the apostles in their trial, while others are responding with joy, they just become angry: v33, 'when they heard this, they were enraged.'

You see, when you feel the challenge of the gospel, and its call upon you to relinquish power, and give up the position in your life of being the one who calls the shots, the one who decides what is right or wrong, the one who decides what goes for you, that position of power and authority in your life, you can feel this battle going on, just as these priests were fighting it. Surrender to Jesus, trust him, and the outcome is joy and peace as these apostles and multitudes discovered, resist Jesus as the priests were doing, and it just seems to get harder, as these men grew ever more angry.

And the truth is they would almost certainly have killed the apostles if it was not for the intervention of Gamaliel, the last character we're going to look at. And he's an interesting guy. He was the most prominent rabbi of the day, (in fact the apostle Paul was one of his students), and he came from the opposite religious party to the High Priest and his men. They were Sadducees, he was a Pharisee. As Luke puts it in v34, he was 'a teacher of the law held in honour by all the people.' And it's his gravitas and his standing that saves their bacon, as he persuades the council not to be hasty, but to watch and wait and see, and if this Christianity thing isn't of God, it will fizzle out; and if it is, well… you don't want to find yourself fighting against God.

And I think Gamaliel is fascinating because his advice is so wise, and it diffuses things somewhat, but… it doesn't get to the root of the issue, does it? Gamaliel wants to put off deciding whether this movement is or is not of God, and he fails to examine, or at least he fails to suggest the council examines and reflect on what it is that Peter and the others are actually saying. Is there truth here or not? Was Jesus raised from the dead, or not? Gamaliel wants to park his decision, he declines to commit himself either way, he adopts a wait and see approach. In short, he nails his colours firmly to the fence and then sits on it. And the tragedy is that, for all his learning, and all his gravitas, and all his wisdom, if what history tells us is correct, then Gamaliel went to his grave waiting and seeing how things turn out. He went to his grave sitting on the fence.

And yet the good news of Jesus calls every one of us to decide. To hear the call to repent and believe, to examine the evidence, and then decide, what will I do with Jesus? And whilst I have zero doubt that the apostles were grateful for Gamaliel's intervention, his wait and see approach was in stark contrast to their courage.

Rejoicing in Adversity

Now there are two striking things about the way the apostles conduct themselves during their trial. The first one is that they make no attempt to defend themselves, or to secure their own release, do they? Instead, they use the trial as another opportunity to do the very thing they are on trial for in the first place, and that is talking about Jesus. Verse 29-30, 'But Peter and the other apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men", i.e rather than you! "The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed." And so far from their talk about Jesus being subversive, or destructive to the Jewish faith, they want the council to see how Jesus is the fulfillment of everything their fathers longed for and looked for, that he was the culmination of all that the God of their fathers was up to.

But the truth is that obeying God rather than men comes with a cost, doesn't it? They were sent out whilst Gamaliel tried to calm things down, and when they were called back in, v40, 'they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus.' Now this beating may well have been the 40 lashes minus 1 that could kill a man, but whatever it was, this was serious, it wasn't just a slap on the wrist, and it was a warning of worse to come.

But of course, a flogging is not just physical is it? There is also the very public shame of it all. But that's the second thing that is so striking about the way the apostles conduct themselves: v41: 'Then they left the presence of the council, *rejoicing* that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.'

What?! They rejoiced at being humiliated? They found honour at being dishonoured? I mean their backs must have been in agony, and on top of that is the shame, and these guys find reason for joy? And not just joy, but courage, because in v42 Luke says, 'And every day, in the temple and from house to house [in public and in private], they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.' Now I don't know about you, but when I feel humiliated, I tend to

get defensive and resentful, and they're rejoicing! And I don't tend to think of disgrace as a grace, as something to thank God for, do you? And yet here are these men, filled with joy that God should allow them to go through with this, and then getting on and doing what got them into trouble in the first place all over again.

So where did they get that kind of joy, where did they get that kind of courage, because this is of more than academic interest for us isn't it? You see, if you're not yet a Christian, it can take courage to respond to the gospel when it might cost you, just as it would have taken courage for Gamaliel, or the High Priest, or those who stood on the side but dared not join, to have examined the truth. And for those of us who are Christians, doesn't it take courage sometimes, to share the gospel, to talk about Jesus at school, or on campus, or to a colleague at work, and it would be easier to stay quiet?

And what about the courage, not to respond to or share the gospel, but to simply live it? The courage to lay down your life for your spouse, the courage to acknowledge areas where you need to see God changing you, the courage to love when it hurts and it would be easier just to walk away; the courage to speak and confront when you'd rather stay quiet, the courage to hold your tongue and not speak, when you'd rather shout and accuse.

Where can we find the kind of joy and courage for faith and life that these men knew?

The Real Hero

You see when Peter gets the chance to speak at the trial, he makes it clear what it is that's inspiring him and his friends, and it's the Man behind their message. Verse 29-32, 'But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit."'

We are witnesses… we've seen and we know that the One you crucified, God has raised from the dead, and exalted as Leader and Saviour. And that word there, Leader, get's variously translated as Prince, or Founder, or Author, or Captain, or Champion. He's the one who goes before, and leads, and in leading sets the example, he's the ultimate hero. And that's where they got their joy and courage from: by doing what the writer to the Hebrews tells all of us to do, Hebrews 12:1-2, 'Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder – [same word, the Leader] and perfector of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

But why could the example of Jesus bring them joy and give them courage when their backs were crying out in the pain of the flogging and the humiliation of the trial? Because they knew why it was that Jesus endured what he endured. Because they knew that the joy that was set before him, the joy that gave Jesus

the courage to go through what he went through, was them, and you and me.

You see, when Peter says of Jesus, v30, "whom you killed by hanging him on a tree" everyone in the room would have known what he was talking about. Because the Law states that whoever was hung on a tree, 'is cursed by God' (Deut 21:23). But why should knowing that Jesus died cursed by God result in future joy for him, and joy and courage for these apostles to face whatever we must face? I mean wouldn't him dying cursed result in anything but joy and courage?

But he bore the curse so they and you and I would never have to. And the ultimate curse, the curse of the covenant, the curse for breaking God's law was separation and alienation from God and his people, and when he died on the cross, Jesus took all the curse, the curse of eternal separation upon himself. And when he cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' it wasn't because he just *felt* abandoned by God, he *was* abandoned by God, he was dying the death of the cursed, alienated and separated from God, so that Peter and his friends and you and I never need to know what that is like. And the joy Jesus saw set before him, was you, and me, and these men. That instead of curse and separation, we might know love and grace, and life and forgiveness and the tender embrace of our heavenly father: because the curse has been dealt with.

And if Jesus was willing to go through that to bring them to himself, then these men would do anything for him. No cost was too high, because nothing compared to what He had given up for them. You see, the religious leaders wanted to cling on to power, Jesus gave it up for us. They used threats and violence to get their own way; Jesus gave himself up to threats and violence, to bring us to himself; they cursed and raged, Jesus bowed his head and said, 'Father, forgive them, they don't know what they do.'

And when you know in your heart that that is how much he loves you, you can face the insults of others, because you know whose opinion really counts, and you know what he thinks of you; you can face the cost, and find the courage, to trust him with your life, and relinquish that place of power in your life, and say yes to him; you can find the courage to speak up and tell others about him; and you can give of yourself, and lay down your life in service, and in living out the gospel in your relationships, because you are rock solid secure in his love for you.

Because ultimately, these apostles, they're not the heroes, they were just normal people like you and me. It's Jesus, he's the real hero. He's the Leader and Saviour, He's the one to follow. And as we do, joy and courage will be ours.