

Reflection on Acts 5. 17-26 by David Kennedy

Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, "Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life." When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with their teaching. When the high priest and those with him arrived, they called together the council and the whole body of the elders of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the temple police went there, they did not find them in the prison; so they returned and reported, "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside." Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were perplexed about them, wondering what might be going on. Then someone arrived and announced, "Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

In Eastertide we read of the faith of the early Christians in their utter conviction about the resurrection of Jesus. One of the images is the idea of being freed from prison. As the well-known hymn states:

*Had Christ that once was slain,
Ne'er burst his three-day prison,
Our faith had been in vain,
But now hath Christ arisen.* (G. R. Woodward)

If death and the tomb were a kind of prison-house for him and the whole human race, Jesus by his rising has burst through the stone walls that confined him. They were simply not strong enough to hold him in their power. The resurrection is all about freedom and liberation, the ending of limits, the dawning of the new age.

In Acts of the Apostles we read of the infant Church. At the beginning of Acts, before the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the upper room was like a prison. The doors were locked and bolted because of fear; the disciples were struggling to understand what Easter meant. But when the Spirit came, the same Spirit that raised the Lord Jesus from the dead, the doors were opened wide by the rushing mighty wind of the Spirit and the apostles, now empowered, became fearless preachers of the risen Christ.

If the resurrection proclaims that death could not imprison Jesus, the message in Acts is that the gospel also cannot be imprisoned. In the above reading, the Apostles were arrested and imprisoned for preaching Christ in Jerusalem. Luke describes 'an

angel of the Lord' coming and unlocking the prison doors and enabling the apostles to leave. He exhorted them to return to the streets and continue preaching. The title 'angel of the Lord' is found in the Old Testament to denote God's messenger or God's presence. And there is a lovely touch in the narrative – when the authorities investigate the prison, the prison doors are locked and the sentries are standing guard, but the cell is empty. Whether we are meant to understand a supernatural happening or God inspiring someone to effect a daring escape is unclear; whatever the case, the point is unmistakable – the gospel can't be silenced, it will not be imprisoned.

And if you read on in Acts, the final section of the book includes a great irony. St Paul is taken prisoner at the insistence of the Jewish authorities for proclaiming the risen Christ. But as a Roman citizen, he had the right to appeal to Caesar himself to prove his innocence. And appeal he does. And so Paul is taken under guard on the eventful journey to Rome, the centre of the known world. Even as a prisoner he speaks to people about Christ, and the gospel continues to spread to the heart of the Roman Empire. Paul was a prisoner, but the gospel was free.

This should inspire us as we seek to share our Easter faith. The resurrection is not a theory, an opinion, a take it or leave it assertion. It is the key to the meaning of life, to the destiny of the whole human race. Its truth stands, and no opposition, no prison-house, no apathy, no alternative philosophy, can negate it or shut it away. It is the truth that we must proclaim if we are to be the Church of Jesus Christ. And even if some don't like it – as the Jewish authorities in Acts sought to negate it, we must still proclaim it, yes, with sensitivity but also with boldness.

'Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life' – *the whole message about this life*. What we proclaim in the Church is *life*, the risen life of Christ which we receive through the Holy Spirit. St Paul in Galatians describes this life as the 'fruit of the Spirit' – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – and he adds, there is no law against good things like these. These are the graces that set us free. We proclaim all that enriches human living. This is our calling if we are truly to be Easter people.