

Easter Day has been and gone. Hopefully through Lent we have reflected more deeply on issues of life and faith. Many people have read Lent books or attended Lent courses, but once Easter arrives, it is easy to stop our reflections and carry on as before.

In the same way, the apostles were in danger of slipping back into their old ways after the resurrection. They too had their human limitations, but it was with the help of the Holy Spirit, that they were driven forward and given courage to step forth in their ministry.

In our reading this morning from Acts, Luke tells of the apostles coming up against opposition – something they will *constantly* face in their mission.

They stand, once again, before their enemies. The high priest accuses them of trying to lay the blame for Jesus' death on the Jews and on the council. He reiterates his order for the apostles to *cease preaching*.

They are already in immense danger, and yet, when challenged about their Christian teachings in Jerusalem, Peter answers, with great courage, stating that they are called "obey God rather than any human authority"

Not only does Peter answer with courage, but *even* takes the opportunity, given by their arrest, to proclaim the gospel further. He states that the temple leaders are *indeed* guilty, but what is important is that he also gives the message that, in spite of their guilt, forgiveness is offered –Forgiveness, which in *itself* is a *key part* of the resurrection message.

Of course, Peter's *continued assertion* that the great religious leaders of Israel *have* sinned and need forgiveness enrages them.

How does all this equate to us today?

Where does this boldness of the apostles find a voice today?

Here, in this country, a preacher is not censored by a first century Jewish High priest or Roman governor. Today, I am fortunate enough to be preaching God's truth, in God's house, to God's people.

You could say in the pulpit, I am preaching to a captive audience – preaching to the converted. It is hardly the same challenge that Peter and the apostles had.

Nevertheless we are, through the words of scripture, being called to obey God rather than any human authority. The very fact that we *attend* church would suggest that we are already fulfilling this.

We come to church to hear a truth, to strengthen our faith as a community, to hear things which we would probably not hear outside the church. Here, at St Mary's, and in other churches in this country we have the privilege of coming to hear deep truth, spoken with love and with conviction.... And we do so in safety.

But what about those who preach the gospel in countries, where it is a *huge risk* to do so in the 21st century- countries where Christians are persecuted; churches where people face serious consequences for following their faith.

The charity, Open Doors, highlights as many as 50 countries in the world where it is difficult to live as a Christian. These are the places where followers of Christ must keep their beliefs hidden and where living the gospel means facing beatings, imprisonment, discrimination and abuse.

In spite this danger, they manage an existence anchored in the hope that Christ brings.

Perhaps the defining image of the past year has been that of the refugee. Their images have filled the news reports, huddled into perilously overcrowded boats,

eking out an existence in refugee camps, desperately queuing at border posts, or trudging across dusty plains carrying the fragments of their lives in plastic bags.

Our impression of the refugee crisis is largely defined by events in the Middle East. Yet the truth is that this is a global phenomenon. Throughout the world, people are on the move – and millions of them are Christians.

Before the war there were some 1.8 million Christians in Syria; now best estimates stand at between 700,000 and 800,000.

Most of Syria's refugees have ended up in refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon or Jordan. But many Christians fear to go into the camps where, in the words of one, 'we are still a vulnerable minority in a very dangerous place'.

"You flee to survive and keep your children safe, but it is just as hard in the camp"

There are the people we hold regularly in our prayers.

Christians living in these countries need the support of the body of Christ, to help them stand firm in their faith, and we will continue to keep them in our prayers.

Let us hope that *they* may draw courage from Luke's writings about the people of the early Christian church, and the opposition they came up against.

It is clear that issues for the church that Luke confronts in the book of Acts are still crucial today, such as the relationship of the church and state, relations between Christians and Jews, relations between Christians and the secular.

We are challenged to measure what we do as Christians, by Luke's understanding of what God has called the church in all ages to be and to do. Through his writings in the book of Acts, it is a gauge by which we can measure ourselves as a faithful Christian community.

What about outside the church?

Perhaps Peter and the other apostles will encourage us to let it be widely known outside church, in the work place or wherever we find ourselves, that we are Christians and seekers of truth. Whether we speak of our faith to others, or lead by example in the way we try to live our lives, for example, extending a caring hand to those in difficulty or being agents of reconciliation.

The challenge is to discern and act upon what we believe is obedience to God, rather than any other force.

Perhaps that is what it means to 'obey God rather than any human authority'.

Acts is Luke's description of the nature and purpose of the Christian church in all times and among all peoples.

Paul said (Romans 8:38-9)

"Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord."

Part of living the resurrection life, is that whatever life throws at us, beyond despair, there is hope and joy.

So on this Sunday after Easter, may we be filled with that same courage and boldness that the Holy Spirit had given the apostles? May we not remain silent but proclaim the victory that Christ has over death. May we experience the awesome power of our resurrected Lord and may we have the trust to obey God rather than any human authority.

Amen