

Third Sunday of Easter Reading 1

[Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41](#)

When the captain and the court officers had brought the apostles in and made them stand before the Sanhedrin, the high priest questioned them, “We gave you strict orders, did we not, to stop teaching in that name? Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and want to bring this man’s blood upon us.” But Peter and the apostles said in reply, “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our ancestors raised Jesus, though you had him killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior to grant Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins. We are witnesses of these things, as is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.” The Sanhedrin ordered the apostles to stop speaking in the name of Jesus, and dismissed them. So they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.

Jerome Biblical Commentary

Persecution before the Sadducees. 5:17–42.

17–28. Not long before this Peter and John had been released from the court of the Sanhedrin with a stern warning. But the additional healings and the multitudes which crowded around the disciples caused the High Priests and the Sadducees to become very indignant. They ordered that the disciples should be seized and thrown into the common prison. It was there that another miracle occurred. Their escape from the common prison was not accomplished by a *deus ex machina*, as in the Greek tragedies, but by a real angel or “messenger” from the Lord. They were released from prison and were told, **Go, stand and speak in the temple.** Having been warned and imprisoned, the disciples could not be deterred from this heavenly command.

Early the next morning they entered the Temple and did as they had been commanded by the angel. When the Sanhedrin convened to discuss the matter of the disciples, whom they thought were in prison, they felt it necessary to bring the disciples before them once again. Thus an officer was sent to the prison to retrieve them, but returned with the news that the prison doors were securely shut and the keepers were on duty outside the doors, but no one was to be found in the prison. The immediate concern of the High Priest, the captains of the Temple, and the chief priests was that the miraculous release of the disciples would be yet another story that would grow, causing even greater popularity for the followers of the Lord

Jesus. Thus the officers were commanded to bring Peter and the others from the Temple, but without violence for fear of the people.

When they took their place before the Sanhedrin, the president of the court (the High Priest) reminded them that they had previously been warned about preaching in the name of Jesus. They thought the disciples were attempting to place responsibility for the death of Jesus on the leaders of the Sanhedrin. In questioning Peter, the High Priest attested to a fact that is truly miraculous in light of the great persecution the early church had received. In just a short time, due to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit of God, the High Priest exclaimed to the disciples, **ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine**. This remains as an example and a challenge to every church of every age to do likewise.

29–32. We ought to obey God rather than men. Peter is not so much advocating open defiance against the state as he is absolute dependence upon God. Having yet another golden opportunity to preach Christ and Him crucified, Peter falls back upon his pattern of making reference to the slaying of Jesus and the cursed hanging upon a tree (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13). Also his message contains a note of repentance and forgiveness of sin, as well as his repeated claims to be among the witnesses of these things.

33–40. So enraged at the defiance of the believers in Christ were the Sadducees that they were about to pass judgment on the disciples and sentence them to death. However, the pharisaic members of the court, although in the minority, still had a very powerful and persuasive voice in the judgments of that court. Perhaps the most respected man of the entire Sanhedrin was the renowned Pharisee named Gamaliel. This *rabban*, a doctor of the law, was the leader of the famous school of Hillel. He had many illustrious disciples, among them Saul of Tarsus (cf. 22:3). When this prestigious elder rose to speak, everyone listened.

With calmer heads now prevailing, Gamaliel cautioned the Sanhedrin concerning their intentions to put the disciples to death. First he reminded them of an insurgent named Theudas, **boasting himself to be somebody**. It is obvious that Gamaliel did not believe Theudas was anyone of importance, but his following grew to four hundred persons before he was slain and his patriots scattered. Nothing for certain is known of this man except that he was probably one of many insurgents who arose in Palestine about the time of Herod the Great in 4 B.C.

Again, Gamaliel reminded the Sanhedrin of a more successful insurgent, Judas of Galilee. This man had a larger following in his revolt of A.D. 6, when he incited a nationalist revolt against paying tribute to Caesar when God alone was Israel's true King (see Josephus, *Jewish War* ii.8.1; *Antiq.* xviii.1.1). The taxing for census referred to was that of Publius Sulpicius Quirinius when he was the imperial legate of Syria for the second time (A.D. 6–7).

Gamaliel's counsel and advice to the Sanhedrin is classic. It is this. If the movement which involves these disciples of Jesus of Nazareth is not of God, it will come to nothing. But, on the other hand, if it is of God, the Sanhedrin certainly would not want to fight against it. This put the Sanhedrin on the horns of a dilemma. They hated the movement, but the reasoning of Gamaliel and his "wait and see" policy had to be adopted. The end result was that **when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go**. A now common procedure, releasing the disciples and forbidding them to preach in the name of Jesus, took on one additional feature. This time the disciples were beaten before they were released.

41–42. Having received the harshest punishment to date, the disciples were in no way disheartened. On the contrary they were **rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer**

shame for His name. Increased persecution simply evoked increased dedication. So much so that **daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.**

KJV Bible commentary. 1997, c1994. Thomas Nelson: Nashville

Haydock's Catholic Commentary

Ver. 26. *Then went the magistrate;*[4] which by the Greek was a military officer. But he did not bind them like prisoners, for fear of a tumult, but desired them to go along with them to the sanhedrim. (Witham) --- *Without violence.* They persuaded them to appear willingly before the sanhedrim, thinking, perhaps, moreover, that they could not bind them, whom the walls of the prison could not confine. The apostles here, and on all other occasions, shew the most astonishing examples of patience, constancy, and obedience to the laws of the country. (Menochius) --- O Jews! who do you shut your eyes against the light? why so blindly mad? You say the apostles took Christ from the tomb. Tell me, then, who stole the apostles from under your locks and bolts? Who conveyed them from your prison through the midst of your guards, without alarming them? Shall the evidence of the miracle serve only to make you the less open to conviction? (Ven. Bede; Denis the Carthusian)

Ver. 28. *Commanding, we commanded you.* That is, charged you severely. --- *You have a mind to bring the blood of this man upon us.* You will make us pass for guilty of the murder of the Messias. (Witham)

Ver. 29. Peter answered boldly, *We ought to obey God, rather than men.* And withal adds, that God had raised from death Jesus, the *Prince and Saviour of mankind*, by whose merits all might find *repentance*, and *forgiveness of their sins*; that they were witnesses of his resurrection, &c. (Witham)

Ver. 33. *They were cut to the heart;*[5] exasperated to fury and madness, and were for killing them. (Witham)

Ver. 34. *Gamaliel.* He that had been St. Paul's master, according to St. Chrysostom, advised them to forbear, and do nothing rashly. [Ver. 38.] *Meddle not with these men;* literally, *go from them.*[6] For, saith he, if this be the *work of men* only, it will soon fall to nothing; but if it be from God, you cannot hinder it, and you will only make yourselves guilty, by resisting the designs of God. They *consented to him*, so far as not to put them to death; but they made them be *scourged*, which they *rejoiced at*; and they dismissed them with reiterated *threats*. (Witham) --- Gamaliel was the master of St. Paul, Barnabas, Stephen, and others, and favoured the Christians. St. Clement and Ven. Bede think he was then a Christian, but concealed his conversion at the instigation of the apostles, that he might have an opportunity of defending Christ in the council. He afterwards professed his faith publicly, and was canonized with his son Abibas. See Baronius, 3d of Aug. (Tirinus)

Ver. 39. Time, and the evident success of Christ's Church, prove it to be of God. No violence of the Jews, no persecution of heathen princes, no attempts of domestic adversaries, heretics, schismatics, or evil livers, have been able to prevail against it. Men of superior abilities have made violent attacks against it; their memory, and that of their disciples, has either been buried and forgotten, or liveth only in malediction and infamy. Let, then, no Catholic be dispirited, because modern heresies continue; Arian and other heresies have continued much longer, have been more powerfully supported by temporal power, and yet

have come to nothing. The Catholic religion was the first, and it will be the last religion.

Ver. 41. Rejoicing. The joy of the apostles on the present occasion, is one of the greatest of miracles. Only the yoke of Jesus could make this sweet. But so the faithful servants of God have always found it. In tribulation, they abounded in inward peace and joy, which made them insensible of their exterior sufferings. (Haydock)

[1] Ver. 2. Defraudavit, *enosphisato*. Intervertit aliquid de pretio. St. Augustine, serm. xxvii. de verbis apostoli. Sacrilegii damnatur, & fraudis. See St. Chrysostom, hom xii. in Acta.

[2] Ver. 3. Tentavit. In all Greek copies at present, *eplerosen*. But St. Epiphanius, Hær. lix. p. 500. reads *epeirasen*.

[3] Ver. 5. See St. Augustine, lib. iii. cont. Parmen. chap. i. p. 56. tom. 9. nov. Ed.

[4] Ver. 26. Magistratus, *o strategos*.

[5] Ver. 33. Dissecabantur. *dieprionto*; which Arias Montanus translates furebant.

[6] Ver. 34. [Ver. 38.] Discedite ab istis. *apostete*.

Daily Bible Study Series (non-Catholic)

ARREST AND TRIAL ONCE AGAIN

Acts 5:17–32

But the high priest and his party (the local sect of the Sadducees) were filled with envy, and they laid hands on the apostles and put them under public arrest. But through the night the angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison and led them out and said, "Go, stand in the Temple and tell the people all the words of this life." When they heard this they came into the Temple very early and began to teach. When the high priest and those with him arrived, they summoned the Sanhedrin and all the council of the sons of Israel; and they despatched messengers to the prison that they should be brought. When the officers arrived they did not find them in the prison. When they returned, they brought news saying, "We found the prison shut with all security, and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened the doors we found no one inside." When the superintendent of the Temple and the chief priests heard these words, they did not know what to make of them and could not understand what could have happened. But someone arrived and told them, "Look now, the men you put in prison are standing in the Temple and teaching the people." Then the superintendent of the Temple went away with his officers and fetched them, but he used no force, for they were afraid of the people in case they might be stoned. When they had fetched them they stood them amidst the Sanhedrin. The high priest questioned them, "We laid the strongest injunctions on you not to teach in this name; and, look now, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are aiming at bringing on us guilt for the blood of this man." Peter and the apostles answered, "It is necessary to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you got into your hands and hanged on a tree. God has exalted him as Prince and Saviour at his right hand, to give repentance to Israel and remission of sins, and we are witnesses of these things, as is the Holy Spirit, whom God gave to those who obey him."

THE second arrest of the apostles was inevitable. The Sanhedrin had strictly ordered them to abstain from teaching in the name of Jesus and they had publicly disregarded that injunction. That to the Sanhedrin was a doubly serious matter. These apostles were not only heretics, they were also potential disturbers of the peace. Palestine was always an inflammable country; if this were not checked it might well result in some kind of popular rising; and that was the last thing the priests and Sadducees wanted, because then Rome would intervene.

There is not necessarily a miracle in the release of Peter and John. The word *aggelos* has two meanings. It means an angel; but it is also the normal word for a messenger. Even if the release of the apostles had been brought about by human means, the agent of the release would still be the *aggelos* of the Lord.

In the narrative of the events after the release we see vividly displayed the great characteristics of these early men of God.

(i) They were men of courage. The command to go straight back and preach in the Temple sounds to a prudent mind almost incredible. To obey that command was an act of almost reckless audacity. And yet they went. (ii) They were men of principle. And their ruling principle was that in all circumstances obedience to God must come first. They never asked, "Is this course of action safe?" They asked, "Is this what God wants me to do?" (iii) They had a clear idea of their function. They knew that they were witness for Christ. A witness is essentially a man who speaks from first-hand knowledge. He knows from personal experience that what he says is true; and it is impossible to stop a man like that because it is impossible to stop the truth.

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY

Acts 5:33–42

When they heard this they were torn with vexation and planned to destroy them. But a certain Pharisee called Gamaliel stood up in the Sanhedrin, a teacher of the law held in honour by all the people, and ordered that the men should be put out of the meeting for a short time. He said to them, "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves regarding these men and think what you are going to do with them. Before these days Theudas arose, saying that he was someone. Men to the number of about four hundred attached themselves to him. He was destroyed and all who were persuaded by him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilaeen arose, in the days when the census was taken, and he persuaded the people to follow him. He too perished and all the people who were persuaded by him were scattered abroad. And in the present circumstances I say to you—keep off these men and let them go, because if this purpose and this affair is of men it will come to nothing; but if it is of God you cannot stop them. So take care that you do not turn out to be men who are fighting against God." They were persuaded by him. So they called in the apostles, and, when they had threatened them, they enjoined them not to speak in the name of Jesus and sent them away. So they went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they were deemed worthy to suffer dishonour for the name. Every day in the Temple and from house to house they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus was God's Anointed One.

ON their second appearance before the Sanhedrin the apostles found an unexpected helper. Gamaliel was a Pharisee. The Sadducees were the wealthy collaborationists, who were ever seeking to preserve their own prestige; but the Pharisee had no political ambitions. Their name literally means "The Separated Ones," and they had separated themselves from

ordinary life in order to devote themselves to the keeping of the law in its every small detail. There were never more than about six thousand of them all told, and the austerity of their lives made them highly respected.

Gamaliel was more than respected; he was loved. He was a kindly man with a far wider tolerance than his fellows. He was, for instance, one of the very few Pharisees who did not regard Greek culture as sinful. He was one of the very few to whom the title "*Rabban*" had been given. Men called him "The Beauty of the Law." When he died it was said, "Since Rabban Gamaliel died there has been no more reverence for the Law; and purity and abstinence died out at the same time."

When the Sanhedrin seemed likely to resort to violent measures against the apostles Gamaliel intervened. The Pharisees had a belief which combined fate and free-will. They believed that all things were in the hand of God and yet that man was responsible for his actions. "Everything is foreseen," they said, "yet freedom of choice is given." So Gamaliel's point was that they must have a care in case they were exercising their free-will to go against God. He pleaded that if this matter was not of God, it would come to nothing anyway. He quoted two examples.

First he cited Theudas. In those days Palestine had a quick succession of fire-brand leaders who set themselves up as the deliverers of their country and sometimes even as the Messiah. Who this Theudas was we do not know. There was a Theudas some years later who led a band of people out to the Jordan with the promise that he could divide the waters and that they would walk over dryshod, and whose rising was swiftly dealt with. Theudas was a common name and no doubt this was just such another fire-brand.

His second example was Judas. He had rebelled at the time of the census, taken by the governor Quirinius in A.D. 6 in order to arrange taxation. Judas took up the position that God was the King of Israel; to him alone tribute was due; all other taxation was impious and to pay it was a blasphemy. He attempted to raise a revolution but failed. The Sanhedrin listened to Gamaliel and once again, after threatening the apostles, they let them go.

They went rejoicing in their tribulations. They rejoiced in persecution for two reasons. (i) It was an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to Christ. In Russia in the early days of communism the man who could show the marks of the fetters on his hands and the mark of the lash on his back was held in honour because he had suffered for the cause. It was Mr. Valiant-for-Truth's proud boast, "My marks and scars I carry with me." (ii) It was a real opportunity to share in the experience of Christ. Those who shared in the cross-bearing would share in the crown-wearing.

The Acts of the Apostles. 2000, c1976 (W. Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, Ed.). The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. The Westminster Press: Philadelphia