

Who's In Charge? (Acts 5:17-42)

This week we have had published the Saville report on what happened on Bloody Sunday, 30 January, 1972. It talked about the events and fled to David Cameron giving a public apology for the events.

However later that day came the news report:

Six paratroopers who served in Londonderry on Bloody Sunday today attacked the findings of the Saville Report. The servicemen claim Lord Saville only criticised their commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Derek Wilford, whose decision to send troops into Bogside prompted the shooting, because there was a need to single out someone of rank to blame.

So how are we Christians to respond to such a happening? Surely, it is to follow the way of Christ. This is true with all things in life, all pieces of information especially when it comes to relationships between people.

If we are going to be Christ like we shall:

- Suspend judgment until we have an adequate knowledge of the facts.
- Listen to both sides.
- Try to identify with the fears and pain of both sides.
- Carefully consider an appropriate response.

I am not going to pass comment on the Saville report, I was not there, I do not have his evidence, I have not read the full report, only heard the news items.

However when the report came on the news, I was thrown back in my thoughts to a time when in our Ministers' Fellowship we had the local army chaplain as he was a fellow Baptist minister. We had a meeting in the Officers' mess and as we drove up to the gates we were greeted by a soldier carrying a gun. Nothing unusual about that you may think. But when you looked at the soldier you suddenly realised that the soldier was still a teenager – that was the really scary bit for me!

We like to think that soldiers are in charge – they have the training, but this does not necessarily mean that they will always be or feel in charge. In today's reading, verse 25, we had

“Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.” (Acts 5:25-26 NIV)

The army were worried that day in case as they re-arrested the Apostles that there would be a riot. So that day they were definitely not in charge.

So we look elsewhere that day. What about the Sanhedrin. This was the religious ruling council of the day. It consisted of Pharisees and Sadducees who did not always see eye to eye. They had already said to Peter and John when they had healed the disabled person who begged at the Beautiful Gate

“Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” (Acts 4:18 NIV)

Peter and John and the others ignored this and did more to be noticed. Chapter 5:12

“The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade. No-one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.”

“Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.” (Acts 5:12-18 NIV)

So they were arrested for healing people. They were arrested for doing good. But sadly at times doing good causes jealousy to rise in others. But they were being noticed. The danger is for the church today that we die, due to being inconspicuous, being invisible. The church is not seen and some Christians make more fuss when a mosque is going to be built than doing good for others and being noticed as a good person.

Last Sunday we were with our younger daughter and her husband and grandson, Noah. We went to church with them and the minister encouraged us all to try to do an act of kindness each day for someone – that will notice us for the right reasons, although it may still make others jealous.

So the Apostles were locked up

“But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."” (Acts 5:19-20 NIV)

God let them out with a command. So the Sanhedrin, this august body of people were not in charge. As soon as they locked the Apostles up, god released them. As soon as the Apostles were told to be quiet, God tells them to

“...“Go, stand in the temple courts...and tell the people the full message of this new life.”” (Acts 5:19-20 NIV)

At times we are to be disobedient to the authorities. Other parts of Scripture do tell us to pray for those in authority over us, whether religious or secular. To do even more than this, as Peter says

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.”
(1 Peter 2:13-14 NIV)

But at times we need to be disobedient to the civil authorities. In the last war and leading up to it, most of the churches in Germany were silent and said nothing against the rise of Adolf Hitler. They allowed Hitler to bring misery to many without so much as a word.

Remember that the religious leaders are not in charge. Even the civil authorities are not in charge, whether that be a dictator like Idi Amin of Uganda, or David Cameron, the elected Prime Minister of Britain. They are not in charge, even if they think they are.

So is it the case of the underdog being really in charge. On Tuesday evening this week the commentators were all wondering if North Korea, or that should be Korea DPR – Democratic People’s Republic, would be the underdog and beat mighty Brazil. Brazil seeded number 1, Korea I think are seeded number 138. But would Korea be in charge and rise to victory. The answer was ‘No’ as they lost 2-1, but they did give Brazil a scare!

So did that day in the court of the Sanhedrin mean that the Apostles were in charge? Listen once again to what they said

“The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” (Acts 5:30-32 NIV)

The disciples spoke in their defence, not about themselves and what they had done and how wonderful they are, but about Jesus, about God. What do we speak of? The church, ourselves, or Jesus and what he has done? Notice, as an aside, in the speech, the Trinitarian nature of the statement as well

God the Father raised Jesus, God the Son from the dead and this was witnessed by God the Holy Spirit

How can the Apostles be in charge when they do not talk about themselves – they only talk about Jesus when asked to give a defence? Maybe at times we are too quick to talk about ourselves and too slow to talk about Jesus. I include myself in this as well.

So who is in charge? If it is not the soldiers, not the Sanhedrin, not the Apostles, then who is it. In this passage there is one lovely verse. It is verse 29. It is beginning of Peter’s speech which I left out just now. Verse 29

“Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"
(Acts 5:29 NIV)

We must obey God rather than men. He has said previously something similar to a similar body of people. That time he said

“..."Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”
(Acts 4:19-20 NIV)

God is the one in charge. Years previously in the history of Israel three men stood before a very irate king, who was threatening to throw them into a furnace to kill them because they would not bow down and worship a statue of the king. The three men said

“..."O king Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Daniel 3:16-18 NIV)

God is the one in charge, not you. That day the Apostles were saying, God is the one in charge, not you. Do you believe that? Do you believe that God is in charge?

Do you live in a way that says ‘God is in charge.’ I do not mean that you go around with your nose in the air, but you are ready to do good and also to not bow to a rule that goes against your Christian faith.

Our news has been filled with people like

- Nadia Eweida, 58, a check-in clerk at Heathrow Airport was sent home for wearing a small silver cross.
- Nurse Caroline Petrie who has vowed to continue praying for patients.
- Helen Slatter, who was described as a blood sampler – or phlebotomist. She has left her job in protest after being ordered to remove a crucifix ‘which could harbour infection’.

As we begun today by saying we do not know all the facts, only what we read in the papers or see or hear on the TV and radio, but some are standing up for what is right, standing up for Christ. They may be doing it in ways that we may or may not agree with, but they are doing it.

So how do you live your life as if God is in charge?

- Do you throw your weight around and become a brat who is spoilt because daddy owns the company or is very rich? Of course not, that is not the Christ-like way.
- Do we then become “gentle, meek and mild.” That is a children’s hymn writer’s definition of being like Christ. Are there any hymns which explicitly praises Jesus condemning religious hypocrites as an evil “brood of vipers,” ‘sons of Hell’, and ‘whitewashed tombs’! I did check up in Songs of Fellowship and there is not one song with any of those phrases in. But it is not un-Christlike to condemn evil. It is not un-Christlike to speak up for justice

So are you going to live as if God is in charge, or allow others to dictate? That day the Sanhedrin

“...had the Apostles...flogged. Then the Sanhedrin ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.” (Acts 5:40 NIV)

And what did the apostles do? The very next verse tells us

“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.” (Acts 5:41-42 NIV)

Firstly they rejoiced at being worthy of being flogged because they followed Jesus. And they carried on telling others about Jesus. May we be the same?

BMS Birthday Scheme

Think about doing a good deed this week. Doesn’t have to be big. Giving someone a drink. Giving someone a smile and cheery hello. Why not? You will be noticed as that lovely person who lifts other people’s spirits.