

**“THEY HAD BEEN WITH JESUS”**

*Acts 4:1-22*

A couple of times recently I've walked through the buildings here and seen little groups of people – people who are part of the church – looking unbelievably glum. In fact, they looked pretty much like the majority of people you see trudging round the shops in the Three Spires Centre. Now I'm not for one moment suggesting that Christians should spend their lives with a kind of fixed grin on their faces, some sort of religious rictus, but there should be something distinctive about us, shouldn't there?

After all, there's a great deal of pressure on us in our society to live lives that conform to some kind of prevailing norm, to “fit in” with what's going on around us, to follow the trends – in fashion, in music, in our shopping habits, our behaviour and so on. It's by no means confined to the young: we are all tempted to blend into the general mass of people around us in our behaviour, appearance and attitudes. If we are too distinctive in the way we look, think or act, we end up being branded as dangerous, crazy or even treacherous.

And as Christians the temptation is often to hide away our Christianity under all the other outward things, so that we don't have to cope with all the hassles that might ensue if people found out that we were actually followers of Jesus Christ. Yet the clear message of the New Testament (and, indeed, the Old Testament) is that God's people are to stand out, to be easily identifiable. Jesus talks of his followers as being “*the salt of the earth*”, “*lights for the world*”, “*a city on a hill*” and so on.

And here in this story of Peter and John, from which we've just read, we have a great example of people who were clearly distinctive, who stood out from the crowd due to their involvement with Jesus. We picked up the story in *Acts 4*, but it begins in *Acts 3*. The events occur not long after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Peter and John are going up to the Temple in Jerusalem to pray, as is their habit, and on the way into the Temple, they encounter a man who is forced to beg from his fellow citizens due to a disability which prevents him working. Peter and John invoke the name of Jesus to heal the man and he starts leaping about, praising God for his new mobility. Naturally, this causes quite a stir among the other worshippers who recognise the man as someone who had been sitting begging for a long time.

Peter seizes the opportunity to tell the curious onlookers what has happened and who is behind it all – Jesus. Unfortunately, he is cut off before the end of his speech and the two men – Peter and John – are whisked off to jail by the Temple guards. Next morning they are taken up to the Sanhedrin (a council of prominent citizens who also function as a court) and told to explain themselves. In Luke's account here, the verse that has always stood out for me is *v13*. It's an encouragement and an enormous challenge to us, especially that last few words – “*they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*”

Jesus had clearly had an amazing effect on their lives for people to be able to say that of them. And Peter and John must have had a real impact on the world around them, not only in the incident of the miracle (which the members of the Sanhedrin had not witnessed) but also in the way they spoke to the crowd, the way they addressed their accusers and the general tenor of their lives. Could we say that we would have similar things said about us?

First of all, just notice who it was that said this about them. The people who realise that Peter and John are distinctive are not other believers. These two apostles are not operating within the safety of their house group or Bible study or elders' meeting. They aren't standing in front of people who agree with them and have had similar experiences, who understand the jargon. They aren't trotting out glib answers and behaving in the “right” way in front of other Christians. It's not a case of the two men giving their testimony at the front of a gathering of approving brothers and sisters who nod their agreement and mumble “Amen”.

No, Peter and John are up before members of the ruling council of the Jews, the very people who were most hostile to Jesus and his message, men who had the power to punish and persecute the disciples. Peter and John had no need to keep on witnessing to other believers, giving their testimony, proving their Bible knowledge, declaring their commitment in the cosy comfort of the church fellowship – their lives had to be of such quality that **others** noticed and began to respect them.

As followers of Jesus Christ, as Christians, we are called to be distinctive **in the world**, to declare our faith and demonstrate the change that Jesus has made in our lives **to outsiders**, to the majority of people in this community who never come near our churches and fellowships. And that's a powerful theme which underlies so much of the teaching of the New Testament. Jesus didn't say to his followers, "*Go into all the churches, youth groups and broadly sympathetic gatherings of men and women.*" No, he said, "*Go into all the world ...*" (*Matthew 28:19*). Peter tells the early Christians that they are always to be ready to give answers to the people who ask why they seem so hopeful. Elsewhere in *Acts* we read that the first believers had an impact on all the people. If the world is to be transformed by Jesus, Paul tells the Romans, then someone has got to go and tell them (*Romans 10:14,15*).

Now, that doesn't mean that our distinctiveness is to be a turn-off for other people – black suits and long faces and no sense of humour on the one hand, or outrageous behaviour which we justify by saying that we're "fools for Christ" on the other – it needs to be attractive. Luke stresses that attitude in the early Christians in *Acts 2:47* (as we've just said) and Paul mentions it in *Romans 12:17*, in his own experience in *2 Corinthians 8:21*, and as an essential qualification for church leaders in *1 Timothy 3:7*. So **how** did the others notice that these two men had been with Jesus?

## **1. THEIR LIVES HAD BEEN CHANGED BY JESUS**

Luke makes a point here of contrasting their courage – and their articulacy – and the fact that they were "*unschooled and ordinary men*". The disciples were a real bunch of peasants – fishermen, minor government clerks, terrorist – with little or no education; with thick local accents (remember Peter was identified by his accent at Jesus' trial?); with no great abilities in this area. Yet here they are after the tremendous events of Easter Day and Pentecost, bold and articulate, willing to stand up for their beliefs in front of the most influential men in their nation. Their humdrum lives had been radically altered: they no longer conformed to what was going on around them.

Paul impresses upon us the same necessity for change in *Romans 12:1,2*. We are to be transformed, we are to have our minds and attitudes renewed so that we approach the issues of the world around us with a different perspective, with different standards. Do people notice that difference in your life?

## **2. THEY LEARNED FROM JESUS**

Peter and John had had the unique privilege of spending the best part of three years with Jesus and all that time they had been learning from him. He taught them directly, as in "The Sermon on the Mount", he taught them in parables, he taught them in conversation, he taught them by example. Unfortunately, they didn't always catch on immediately – often they didn't understand what Jesus was saying the first time round. Sometimes they made the most awful blunders – wanting to be top man, telling Jesus not to be stupid, suggesting totally wrong responses to the situations in which they found themselves – but some of it rubbed off on them in the end.

"But we can't do that," we protest, "because we haven't got Jesus here with us any more." However, we have got accounts of his life and teaching in the Gospels; we have got the Old Testament, upon which Jesus' teaching was founded; we have got the rest of the New Testament, which helps us apply Jesus' teaching to our own situation. In short, we've got the Bible and, as followers of Jesus Christ, we have the help of his Holy Spirit to enable us to interpret it and understand it. We learn from Jesus by reading the

Bible – regularly, just as Peter and John saw Jesus regularly – and by putting into practice in our own lives the things that we read in it. Don't forget what James has to say in *James 1:22*, “*Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says!*”

### 3. THEY LIVED LIKE JESUS

Obviously, spending three years in close proximity to Jesus meant that they learned from him, but it also meant that they gradually came to live like him. We often adopt mannerisms and little habits from our friends, don't we? – especially when we're young. Peter and John didn't simply pick up a few little habits, they adopted his whole lifestyle. They became compassionate; they were able to live simply; they lived in unity; they spoke out against injustice; they tried to help people. In short, they witnessed by their words and by their lives. They weren't just “lifestyle Christians”, who tacked a bit of religiosity on to the rest of their lives when it suited them and was to their advantage. They had a Christian lifestyle, wholly devoted to living as Jesus called them to live.

In *Philippians 2:1-4*, Paul gives us some idea of the qualities that we should be striving towards in our Christian lives. They are things we ought to be aiming for as we try to live our lives **noticeably** for Jesus. Then he sums it all up in the sentence that we read in v5 – “*Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ.*” We so often focus on trying to change our behaviour, which is a waste of time until we have allowed our attitudes to be transformed. It's vital that we allow the Holy Spirit to transform us from within so that our words and actions gradually become more Christ like, so that we actually start to live like Jesus himself.

### 4. THEY SPOKE WITH JESUS

If you're going to spend time with someone, you're not going to get very far if you don't talk to one another. Just imagine going out with your boyfriend or girlfriend, living with your spouse, living together as a family and not speaking! (The thought of it may seem quite attractive to some, but you'd soon get tired of it!) We talk about the things that have happened to us – how happy we are, how fed up we are – we share our feelings, we ask for advice (even if it's only about the colour of a shirt or blouse), we plan things together.

Peter and John talked with Jesus while he was physically with them and, after he had returned to his Father in heaven, they talked with him through prayer. One of the things that Luke seems at pains to emphasise in the opening chapters of *Acts* – and, indeed, throughout the rest of the book – is the prayer life of the disciples and the members of the Early Church.

Prayer is vitally important for us as Christians – both personal prayer and corporate prayer. James Montgomery, the hymn writer, calls it “*the Christian's vital breath.*” It's our main method of communication with Jesus – it's how we ask him for things, how we express our feelings to him, how we gain our strength, how we thank him, how we listen to his Spirit, how we consolidate our relationship with him. If you're at all serious about following Jesus and about being distinctive for him, it's something you cannot afford to neglect.

### 5. THEY SPOKE ABOUT JESUS

This is what had got them into trouble in the first place! Being with Jesus had been exciting: it had dramatically changed their lives. The message Jesus had proclaimed was a message everyone needed to hear, so it's not surprising that Peter and John, when told by the Sanhedrin to stop talking about Jesus, reply, “*We cannot help speaking about what we've seen and heard*” (v20). They were constantly telling other people – it was the greatest thing that had ever happened to them.

What do you do if something special happens to you? You win a prize, you get a grandchild, you have a new kitchen, you get engaged, your children achieve something special – you tell everyone about it, don't you (often in duplicated letters at Christmas time)? If you've become a Christian, nothing better or more exciting or more significant will ever happen to you. And what's more, people desperately need to hear about Jesus, in a way that they will never need to hear about your manicure or your son's selection for the school team. Tell them! Speak about Jesus! Let people know what a difference he's made to your life.

And don't just talk about what a wonderful life you now have. We don't read of Peter and John telling the Sanhedrin that the main reason for their following Jesus is that he has given them peace and lots of new friends. Their lives told the Jewish leaders that. They spoke more about the underlying reasons for their need of Jesus – *“Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven give to men by which we must be saved”* (v12). Speaking from experience is great, but anyone else can counter it from their own experience. On the other hand, dry dogmatic reasoning is useless unless it is backed up by something authentic in your own experience.

Some time after his appearance before the Sanhedrin, Peter wrote a couple of letters to the early Christians who were scattered around the edge of the Mediterranean. In the first of those letters he wrote this (we referred to it earlier on), *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that is within you”* (1 Peter 3:15). People are not going to ask you any questions unless your life is distinctive, unless it is possible to see that you do know Jesus. And if you don't take the trouble to learn from Jesus and to speak to him in prayer, you'll be left without any answers.

Learn from Jesus by reading the Bible, live like Jesus, talk with him and about him. Maybe then your friends, colleagues, family may begin to take note that you, too, have been with Jesus. And let us encourage each other in it as we share our stories and experiences, as we speak with one another about what a great Saviour we follow.