

**“THEY HAD BEEN WITH JESUS”**  
*Acts 4:5-20*

The Scottish churchman, George MacLeod, once said, *“The problem with the church is that no-one wants to persecute it.”* Now you may not consider that a problem – indeed, it’s probably a positive blessing for most of us – but what MacLeod was saying was that the church no longer ruffles anyone’s feathers; it’s lost its prophetic and radical cutting edge. In fact, it’s more or less invisible in our culture – at least as far as its real task of subverting society goes. There’s little actual difference between what happens in the church and what happens in society at large; and that’s not because society is becoming more Christian, but because the church is becoming less distinctively Christian, I believe. And the church, folks, is you and me.

My brother used to have a poster hanging over his bed which said, *“If you were charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”* Would there be any real and noticeably Christian characteristic which others would be able to say identifies you undoubtedly as a disciple of Jesus? OK, if hostile authorities were to burst in here now we’d all be singing hymns and praying and reading the Bible – they’re fairly Christian sorts of things to do. But what about tomorrow morning at work, at the school gate, in the supermarket?

Peter and John were up in front of the magistrates for indulging in Christian activities – healing and preaching and generally being enthusiastic about Jesus Christ. It was frowned upon, mainly because no-one was yet quite sure what it was all about. They weren’t actually charged with anything specific, but the civic and religious leaders gave them a good grilling as to what they were doing. And in their response we have some clues about the path of discipleship which have things to teach us today. That’s particularly true in the light both of our sermon last week as we looked at Jesus’ command to *“go into all the world, making disciples by baptising people and teaching them to obey Jesus’ words”* and of our visit this morning by Tim and Helen who are actually putting this into practice through their work with BMS World Mission .

Central to it all is the phrase in v13 – *“they took note that these men had been with Jesus”*. The way it’s put in Greek shows that it was actually obvious to the leaders just by looking at them: they recognised something special about these two which could be explained only by the fact that they’d spent a lot of time in the presence of the Lord. This morning there are four other things which this passage says to us about being a real disciple, four things about Peter and John which I believe are still very pertinent to us today.

## 1. ORDINARY PEOPLE (v13)

As they stood before the great and the good of Jerusalem, they must have seemed a bit overawed by their surroundings and their examiners. That didn't stop them giving a pretty good account of themselves and communicating convincingly something of their faith in Jesus, the Messiah. But the leaders "*realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men.*" The two Greek words used there are ἀγράμματοι and ἰδιωτης - "*unlettered idiots*" is what it appears to say at first sight. Of course, they weren't. The phrase is one which is often used in Greek to denote people who have not had formal professional or theological training. These were two ordinary blokes who weren't used to the cut and thrust of intellectual and legal debate, who had no grounding in the Scriptures other than what they had heard at the synagogue each Sabbath, who were just not on the same plane as the people questioning them. In other words, they were just like everyone else, with nothing particularly to commend them.

**BUT**, they had been called and used by God – and they had been filled with the Holy Spirit (v8). That's where discipleship starts, as we saw with the kind of people Jesus chose to be part of his group of disciples while he was here in earth – ordinary people, chosen and called by him to get involved in the work of extending the boundaries of his Kingdom. I remember once hearing Joel Edwards, then the General Director of the Evangelical Alliance. He talked about disciples as "*ordinary people doing extraordinary things for God.*" That's it in a nutshell, really.

You and I are, to all intents and purposes, ordinary people. Yes, some of you are highly educated (some in theology, even). Yes, some of you are rich, some are influential, some are gifted in certain areas. But basically, we are all ordinary people. We don't get mobbed in the street, asked to address huge gatherings, we don't expound new and ground-breaking theories in areas that most people are interested in. But Jesus has called us to follow him and has given us the priceless gift of his Holy Spirit to equip us for that following. No-one can offer the excuse that we are too ordinary for Jesus, that we have nothing to offer, that we're not cut out to be a disciple.

Peter and John were ordinary people and that very ordinariness made their speech in front of the leaders all the more remarkable because they demonstrated what the NIV translates as "*courage*". There's no doubt that they needed a bit of bravery to speak as they did in front of a potentially very intimidating group of men, but the word actually conveys something a little different. They spoke with openness, boldness (in the sense of "clarity") and conviction. These ordinary men really meant what they said. It

came from the heart – and there was no beating about the bush. [Let me read you Habit 57 of *The 77 Habits of Highly Ineffective Christians*. Some of you may find it an encouragement.]

This Peter, who speaks with such clarity and conviction here, is the man who wrote to the ordinary people who were scattered around the eastern Mediterranean a couple of decades later, “*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope the you have.*” Be encouraged: you may feel that you’re a very ordinary person, but God has called you to be a disciple, you have the gift of the Holy Spirit, and you have a great and glorious hope within you. If you believe that and try to live in the truth of it, you too can do extraordinary things for God. You can be an effective disciple for him.

## 2. **OBVIOUS EFFECT** (v13)

Now, Peter and John may have been ordinary people, but the leaders were “*astonished*” at them. And that astonishment came from the recognition that they had “*been with Jesus*”. That closeness to Jesus had had an obvious effect. Other people could see that they were followers, disciples of Jesus Christ. Peter and John’s lives have been transformed and they now exude a confidence and an authority that could only have come from their Lord. Now, several factors contributed to that, but this morning the challenge to us is whether anyone else can actually see that we are Jesus’ disciples.

In the places where you live and work and study and spend your leisure time, can people see that you have been with Jesus? Is there anything distinctive about your life? Do others know that you are a follower of Jesus? I read an interview in *Christianity* magazine with Paul Powell, a comedian who wrote for *Week Ending* and many other radio and TV shows. He script edited the last series of *Alas Smith and Jones* and the interviewer asked if had had any difficulty with the material he wrote, as he cut out anything that was offensive or unnecessary. He replied, “They know I’m a Christian, and in many ways it cuts out that embarrassing moment when you have to say, ‘Guys, I’d rather not’, because they know. We’ve avoided confrontation that way.” How many of us would be able to say that about our colleagues? – “They know.” Do they? Is it obvious? Has Jesus had an obvious effect on your life? And is that effect obvious anywhere else but in church? [Try Habit 1.]

And the leaders realise that the message of the gospel which has had such an obvious effect on the lives of Peter and John is likely to have an effect on others as well. So they try to limit the damage by ordering the disciples to curb their preaching activities. In v18 they command them “*not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.*” There’s a very real danger that disciples who are serious about their discipleship will start to affect the lives of other people. The integrity of their actions, the righteousness of their lifestyle,

the transparency of their witness – these things can cause others to think a little more deeply about the gospel we claim to declare. It rubs off. I think I've told you before about Alan Paton, the South African novelist who said that he had "*caught*" Christianity off one of his lecturers at university. Could anyone catch it off you?

There's been stuff in the news this week about a college that has banned its Christian Union from meeting due to the government's ludicrous and theologically illiterate *Prevent* agenda, considering (although they probably actually gave it no consideration at all) that it might foment radicalisation amongst the pupils. In many ways it should make the people who attend it more radical for Christ, but not in the way the government expects. Radical disciples – those who have obviously been with Jesus – should affect the lives of others, but we probably rarely do.

### 3. OBEDIENCE TO GOD (v19)

When it comes to responding to the commands of the leaders not to do any more preaching, Peter and John find that they cannot comply. They are not too sure about obeying them, rather than God. Well, actually they are sure – they're not going to do it. As disciples of Jesus, they have no option but to obey him. It's interesting, isn't it? Each time we looked at this question of discipleship – when we considered *Matthew 28:19* last week, for example – whatever else there is to say about the subject, this annoying little word creeps in. It's not my hobby horse, I assure you. But wherever we look it's there. The word that follows you round the room! There's obviously no getting away from it – disciples have to obey God's word, Jesus' teaching, the prompting of the Holy Spirit (whichever way you want to look at it). We find it a bit scary, because we know that we don't obey as we ought to. But Jesus says "*Obey.*" The first disciples say "*We must obey.*" The whole New Testament is founded on the premise that we obey what God has asked of us.

Now, many people have problems with this. "There are many grey areas," they say. What about the spin that the gospel writers put on things, what about Paul's own emphases, what about the cultural climate, what about the different ways of looking at the Bible? Granted – there are many grey areas, many commands that are difficult to interpret in the context of a different era, many things are seemingly impossible for us to do. But there's a heck of a lot more stuff that's as plain as daylight, about which there's no dispute, which takes no interpretation at all. Why not get on and put some of that into practice while you're trying to sort out the other bits? It's back to Mark Twain's little aphorism again, isn't it – "*It's not the bits of the Bible I don't understand that worry me: it's the bits I do understand.*" No lying,

no gossip, no sleeping with anyone but your marriage partner, no stealing, no judging, no ignoring the poor, no unresolved anger, no jealousy – that should keep most of us going this week.

So Peter and John obey God: they take seriously the gospel imperative to make the good news of Jesus as widely known as possible, whatever the consequences might be. In fact, they can't stop doing it. And that leads into the final point ...

#### 4. OVERWHELMING ENTHUSIASM (v20)

The answer these two give to the leaders is that they cannot help speaking about what they've seen and heard. They are just so excited by it all. Jesus has had such a tremendous effect on them that, to translate the Greek literally, "*We don't have the power not to speak.*" They just can't shut up.

Have you ever been invited round to someone's house within a couple of months of their having their first baby? What do they talk about? There is no escape from it, is there? (Birth experiences, baby's activities, how tired we are, etc.) The enthusiasm is palpable (if not always infectious). On one funeral visit I did the deceased's son was there – he's a speedway supporter. I didn't actually know such people existed when I arrived – but I certainly did when I left! Some people just cannot stop speaking about the things that really excite them – and they can't stop because they think it is wonderful, worthwhile and everyone else should be as enthusiastic as them.

How do you feel about Jesus Christ and the fact that he has saved you, called you, appointed you, and given you not only a powerful message to share but a totally mind-blowing eternal future to look forward to? OK? A bit chuffed? Rather pleased? Or so wonderfully moved by it all that you can't stop talking about it when you get the opportunity? OK, maybe none of us ever really gets to the stage where it's our only subject of conversation – I really doubt whether it was Peter and John's only topic, or even Paul's (whatever he might have written to the Corinthians). But some of us seem afraid, bored, rather tired of all this gospel stuff. It's just something we have to do once a week on Sunday morning - and really, it's not that exciting at all.

Well, if that's the attitude we have to it all, no wonder other people aren't too interested. Listen: this gospel is the most wonderful, radical, powerful, life-changing message the world has ever seen. Jesus is the greatest, most loving, wisest, most heroic figure ever to have walked this earth. God is just unimaginably exciting. You and I can look forward to an eternity spent with him. We have a hot line right to the ear of the Father when things are getting us down. The Holy Spirit can flow through us and

enable us to be people who are transformed, enthusiastic, joyful, hopeful, satisfied and fulfilled. Does that excite you? Do you have any enthusiasm for Jesus when you stop and think about all that?

One of the major tasks of disciples is to make other disciples. You are not going to be able to do that if you communicate the truth of the gospel in way that makes it seem even more boring than reading the 'phone directory. Pray that God will inspire you by his Holy Spirit, that Jesus' words will come alive for you in way that means you just can't stop thinking about them and talking about them, that God will touch your life in such a radical way that it will be obvious to everyone that you have been with Jesus. Don't settle for just being a Christian. Be a disciple and live all out for Jesus.

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Questions for discussion

- 1) "*If you were charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?*" What kind of evidence should there be?
- 2) What are the obvious effects of being with Jesus?
- 3) Is Christianity really dangerous in our culture? Why/why not?
- 4) What excites you about being a follower of Jesus? How do you show it?

5) Is there a danger we might become too radical, too enthusiastic? What might that lead to?