

## SCRIPTURE

### Acts 5:27–32

<sup>27</sup> When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, <sup>28</sup> saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,<sup>[a]</sup> yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” <sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>30</sup> The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup> And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

## MESSAGE – Denial of Reality

This morning’s reading from Acts paints a vivid picture of Peter and the other Apostles boldly facing down the authorities as they proclaim the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

It’s a very different Peter than the one who mere days before could not meet the eyes of a servant girl who asked ‘Aren’t you one of Jesus’ followers?’ His fear has been replaced with courage, his denial replaced with avowal.

Let me set the stage. Peter and the others have been arrested twice in as many days. The first time they were arrested they were brought before the Council – a group that contained the high priest, other priests, and the Sadducees. They were accused of stirring up the crowds and turning the people against their rulers. They were essentially being charged with the same thing Jesus was – sedition and blasphemy.

Before the council Peter gave an impassioned speech, asking why they had been arrested. The trigger event seemed to be a healing that was done in the name of Jesus – a name the authorities did not want spoken aloud in public, and certainly not a name they wanted associated with power or miracles.

So Peter challenged the Sadducees, asking if they were being arrested for healing a man – if doing good was enough reason for them to be thrown in jail. It was a convincing argument – the authorities realised that there was no way to imprison Peter and his crew without coming out the other end looking bad, so they released them with the admonition to not speak about this man Jesus any more, to which Peter and John replied – no promises – we can’t stifle the truth. It always gets out.

Despite their boldness and insolence before the council, it seems that they thought they could do better, so once released the apostles gathered the assembly of believers and prayed for boldness to continue to preach and heal in Jesus’ name. The ground trembled at this prayer.

The townsfolk heard of all this and the people flocked to Peter – bringing the ill on stretchers to lie them in the streets – in hopes that Peter’s shadow would fall on them and heal them.

This irritated the rulers to no end, so the chief priest had them arrested again and thrown into jail. During that night an angel appeared, opened the doors and invited the men to go to the temple and preach there.

This is where this morning's story picks up. The high priest and his retinue went to the jail looking for the prisoners and found the cell still locked but empty. While they were trying to figure it all out, someone came in to tell them that the prisoners were in the middle of the temple, preaching to the crowds.

I can imagine that at this point their blood was beginning to boil – they just can't seem to crush this Jesus movement down.

First Jesus refused to stay dead, and now these prisoners refuse to stay in jail. The worst thing is that they didn't even escape and go on the run like a normal person would – they were in the middle of the busiest place in Israel, openly defying the order they had been given, thumbing their noses at the authority of the temple priests.

So they were again brought before the council and reprimanded to which they replied – who are you? We can't answer to you. You ordered Jesus killed, God refused to accept that and raised Jesus right back up again. God gets the last word here – not you. Of course we are going to follow God's instruction over yours. How could you possibly think we would do otherwise? It sounds like Martin Luther was inspired by this speech of Peter. It was recorded that he said before his accusers 'I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.'

Here's where we get into something really interesting. What both Peter and Martin Luther were saying was 'I don't really have a choice here. I cannot deny reality; I must stand in the truth.' This is something that is much more profound than we might think at first.

The message here is that we must accept reality for what it is. Even if it's hard, even if it means we face some tough choices. Maybe especially when it's hard and we face tough choices. Remember, these men were facing prison time – the destruction of their lives as they knew it – removed from family, loved ones, careers, social position.

They were facing the end, and like Jesus they were offered a way out. Just deny. Renounce. Recant. Agree with my reality and you will live.

But the disciples refused to compromise on truth. They could not deny the truth. As Luther said, it is neither right nor safe to deny reality, even though it may be expedient sometimes.

This should be self evident, but if we look at human behaviour we quickly find that it's not. At least, it's not reflected in our living.

The truth is that denying reality is dangerous. Looking away from danger does not negate it. Pretending that something isn't so is a recipe for disaster and calamity.

If there's a bear in the woods or a snake in the grass we're better off knowing about it. It may make us uncomfortable, it may disrupt our peace of mind, but we'll have a darn sight better chance of surviving till dinnertime if we know that the snake is there. Wishing things away does not work. Try and wish away your income tax and see how that works out for you.

One of the common signs of a heart attack is denial. 'I'm not having a heart attack. I just need to catch my breath. I just need to sit and rest a moment.' That denial will surely lead to death. It is only the actions of the observer who thinks 'I know what's really going on here,' and calls 911 that will save that life.

Only by recognizing and working with reality can we have any hope of thriving in it, or even surviving.

Denial of reality is not just delusion. I would even say that denial and indifference to reality is a form of evil. Denial places us in a position of wilful ignorance, which the bible warns us against. And more than just making us unaware, it actually makes us ungodly.

In the beginning God spoke the universe into creation – logos. Jesus is God's living Word, we read God's written word this morning. God's Word is information encoded and transmitted. The word represents consciousness, awareness, cognition, volition, will, and intent – these are divine attributes. If we are indeed made in the image of God the surely this is what that means.

What sets us apart from the rest of creation? It's not flesh, or bone, or hair. It is that we alone among the animals are self-conscious, sentient, thinking beings. So to deny our ability to think and reason through wilful denial or ignorance is to turn our backs on the very thing that allows us to approach God – or even conceive of him for that matter. Surely that is the definition of sin.

If we turn our attention back to the very first sin, unsurprisingly we find denial at the very heart of it. You can eat that - surely you will not die. That didn't turn out so well.

Denial of reality sets us up in opposition to God. How could it do any other? If denial is our action of setting up some sort of dream kingdom against reality and God is the ultimate reality, then denial of any reality is a denial of God. There is not really any way in which denial is not evil.

Unsurprisingly, this is exactly the case with the denial of the religious authorities. They denied Jesus as the son of God because he challenged their position. They wanted to hold onto their illusory kingdom rather than embrace God's reality, so they killed Jesus. But God, the ultimate reality, was having none of it. He raised his son from the death. The reality is that you cannot kill the Christ. You cannot kill the Word, you cannot kill truth.

So they tried the next best thing – they tried to silence anyone who spoke about Jesus. They locked up Peter and his gang. Again God, the ultimate reality, overruled them. You cannot lock up the Word of God. The truth will not be silenced. The very stones will cry out. At every move, the desires of the temple authorities were frustrated. The harder they tried, the more they failed.

Just like with the Sadducees, when what we are doing is not aligned with reality we will continually encounter frustration and suffering. Our plans will blow up in our faces, people won't do what we think they should, things just don't work properly.

When this is the case, the best thing that we can do is to re-examine our assumptions and presuppositions to determine where we went wrong. If things are continually not working we should test to see if our perceptions are in fact correct. In the church we have a word for this – we call it repentance. Changing the way we think about things.

This is what the disciples invited the temple leaders to do. To repent. To rethink. To change their perception of the situation. Peter did this by baldly naming reality.

Let's not have any more of this maintaining social order, appeasing the Romans, better that one man should die nonsense, he said. Here's what is really going on. You killed the son of God – you hung him on a tree. But, God raised him up again – he is beyond death, he is eternally alive. What's more, he has been elevated to the right hand of God where right now he is waiting to forgive those who repent. That's the reality. You're not fighting against us, you're fighting against God. Now what will you do with that knowledge?

It's unfortunate that Peter's speech is not always read in its entirety. At various times throughout history Peter's accusation that the Judean leaders killed Jesus has been used as a condemnation of Jews as a whole. As a people the Jews have suffered terrible persecutions all over the world, sometimes using this verse as a justification.

But when we read the whole passage we find that Peter's intent was never to condemn, nor destroy. Instead, Peter hoped to lead his accusers to a place in which they would allow themselves to be embraced by Jesus, where they could experience repentance and forgiveness. Peter wanted them to receive a new life, a life of peace and harmony that is aligned with reality, not in opposition to it. A life that is fueled by the Holy Spirit rather than one in battle with the Spirit.

Peter was trying to call his accusers to stand with him in the truth, and that truth is that Jesus came to bring life. Jesus was not resurrected to exact vengeance, but to demonstrate mercy.

The resurrection is confirmation that Jesus is indeed divine, that he is the son of God. And the resurrection is not just proof of who Jesus is, it is a second chance. The resurrection is God's way of saying 'I sent my son – you didn't do too well with that. So, here he is again – you can start over and see if you can receive him better this time.'

That was the message to the Sadducees in this morning's reading. It's also exactly the same message for us.

We ignore reality at our own peril. Our denial of reality leads to death, and sets us up in opposition to God. Living untruthfully is not only futile; it's a sin.

God, the ultimate reality, calls us to himself to live in the light of proper perception. Sometimes what we see in the light will make us uncomfortable – maybe often – but when God faces us with hard realities it is not to condemn and crush, but to diagnose and correct. Our God is a healer.

The fact that God is a healer and a lover is what gives us the strength to face hard truths. Alone, staring into the darkness of the things we have done only serves to destroy us, to tear us down. But when God directs our gaze to those hard realities that we would rather not face it is in order to fix them; to build us up and make us stronger.

Peter's message to the Sadducees and God's message to us now is to repent. Look at the ways in which your life is not aligned with reality, not in sync with God's being and purpose. Then change it.

We are not bound by yesterday's mistakes; we are not locked into behaviours that are self-destructive. God confronts us with truth, to show us that there is a better way. A way of life. A way of truth.

The God of new beginnings is calling you; calling you to follow him over any human authority or ideology. Calling you to a life that is real.