

I was really challenged when John McMullan spoke about having a dream last Sunday, in the context of disappointments they'd had with dreams unrealised. It reminded me of the Scripture that teaches we're never too old to dream. I mean of course the words of Joel, spoken by Peter on the Day of Pentecost:

**'In the last days, God says,  
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,  
your young men will see visions,  
your old men will dream dreams.'**

We're still living in the last days so this must surely be the time to dream

In relation to this community I have several dreams; I'd like to name a couple:

- That we'll increasingly become a biblically functioning community along the lines of Acts 2; that God will exponentially use us as agents of the kingdom in fruitful ways.
- That someone will have it laid on their hearts to give ICONZ for boys another go. I know I don't have the strength, the energy or the mobility to do this – just the longing. I know it depends on having the one person who others will support and encourage. We need at Glenis Whipp for ICONZ.

Last Sunday we ended our opening worship by singing, **'you ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart.'** We continue with our 'Jesus lives' theme this morning and tonight when the young people report back from Easter Camp, we consider what to do when you come down from the mountain.

The apostles certainly had amazing experiences after Jesus appeared to them: Pentecost, that first temple healing, the beginning of the fledgling Christian community and their first brush with the authorities, the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst and the morphing of the 'what's mine is mine' attitude into 'what's ours is ours.' I think we've retreated a bit from that one haven't we?

### **THEN!**

The community was compromised by two believers claiming to be people they weren't; interestingly, their exposure led to:

- Powerful ministry by apostles – signs, wonders and everyone healed which led to:
- Persecution – imprisonment, release and proclamation.

Which brings us to today's reading.

### **SLIDE 2: Acts 5:27-32**

**27 The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. 28 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,' he said. 'Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.'**

**29 Peter and the other apostles replied: 'We must obey God rather than human beings! 30 The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead – whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. 31 God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. 32 We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.'**

The battle lines are drawn.

On one side we have the 'authorities', the powerful people; the men in charge; in this case represented by the Sanhedrin, the highest religious court in Israel. This group had civil authority as well. In our country we have local and nation-wide government and we have the courts to back up these local and nation-wide powers. Today at a local and national level we have no comparative group to deal with religious matters, other than our regular ODT columnists.

It wasn't all bad then and it's not all bad today – that is unless you're applying for a building consent..... Authorities such as the local council, the police and other agents of local/nation-wide authority among other things are charged with keeping us safe and secure. On Thursday we hosted two seminars about the new health and safety legislation. The 'authorities,' in this case central government have decided too, too many people are injured or killed in work and other situations. The most representative group of Christians we've had here – interestingly, far more representative than last Sunday's Town Hall Resurrection Service.

Authorities are expected to provide order and sometimes they have to curtail our freedom. An absurd example of this is we're not free to choose which side of the road we drive on; cyclists aren't allowed to choose where they ride. Mind you with the recent cycleway fiasco that keeps changing. There are laws concerning where dogs are allowed to roam and what we're permitted to bring into the country. And apparently there may be some laws about freedom camping....

Additionally we can't have anyone practicing medicine, dispensing medication and doing surgery – they have to be credentialed, educated, vetted and approved. This doesn't seem to work so well in education but that's for another day.

This is what bothered the authorities about Peter and his friends performing miraculous signs and wonders. You can't have unlearned, ordinary people running loose, healing, taking things into their own hands, proclaiming a power let loose in the world greater than the power of government – there must be proper, accredited channels.

Even in the church we have these issues. To be a registered minister in our community of churches you have to do certain things – I was interviewed before being accepted for training. I was re-interviewed halfway through my training and then at the end I was recommended to the wider church as someone suitable for ministry – just shows doesn't it, how some people escape through the cracks. And even today if I want to keep my registration there are certain things I have to do.

The problem in Acts and in today's passage is that the authorities didn't understand or didn't want to understand what had been set free on the earth. To them Jesus was still dead, **'Yet you are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.'** The behaviour of the apostles was out of line.

Inevitably then Luke portrays these governing religious authorities as a bunch of buffoons - they think they're in charge; they think they can put an end to the post-Easter commotion.

Luke however understands that a different power has been set free in the world, the power that God raised up from death, a divine power for good that can't be contained, accredited or channelled by the powers that be.

Those who think they're in control are shown to be powerless and the uneducated and inexperienced people like Peter and the other apostles are unmasking the authorities and making them look like fools.

On the other side we have these men and women, pretty much the lowly and the dispossessed, the people who made up the first Christian congregations who find this scripture when they read it God's word; when they heard the story of political tables being turned they would have understood this as gospel.

By implication this part of Acts asks us – whose side are you on?

Would you be with the apostles, going out performing mercy among the marginalized and the dispossessed, being audacious with the authorities, refusing to pipe down and be quiet or would you be sitting behind a desk, telling the 'uneducated and experienced' to be careful what they said and not rock the boat.

Let's get this straight; the church of Jesus Christ hasn't always been on the side of Peter and friends. Sometimes the church has allied itself with the forces of death rather than risk life after Easter.

There was a church in Birmingham, Alabama where guards were hired to stand at the door of the church on Sunday morning in order to terrify any African-American who might attempt to worship Jesus there. It died, some would due to its racial prejudice and practice of injustice; you might equally say it died due to a lack of belief in the truth of Easter.

There were churches in Germany, I found out this week, which used forced Jewish labour to accomplish their purposes. Did they believe the truth of Easter? Christians haven't always seen things so clearly as Peter.

And lest we think we're off the hook I wonder sometimes if we exclude rather than include and so live on the wrong side of Easter. Isn't this what part of the debate in the US elections is about?

Peter summed up how the apostles saw things:

**'We must obey God rather than human beings!'**

**'We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.'**

Today's text then is one of good news and bad news:

Good News for all those who suffer under the heel of death-dealing oppressive authorities who do so under the delusion that they're in charge

Bad news for any of us who have exchanged the disruptive life-giving truth of Easter for the lordship of death

As Peter stood before the powerful that day, the authorities couldn't work out a way to keep him, to keep them locked up and quiet; the powerful that had such contempt for Peter's lack of education and refinement.

We see in the text the true risen authority of Jesus at work, the same authority that we can build our lives on

**You must obey God**

**You are witnesses of these things**