

Acts 4 23-31 Matthew 6:7-15

Acts 4²³ On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.

'Sovereign Lord,' they said, 'you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵ You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

“‘Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

²⁶ The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.’”

²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.’

³¹ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Matthew 6 ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ This, then, is how you should pray:

“‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’”

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Who watched England playing New Zealand in the rugby World cup semi-final yesterday? A very challenging encounter. England rose to the occasion magnificently, showing total commitment to their task and defeating NZ convincingly 19 to 7 - despite having a brilliant Ben Young try wrongly disallowed in the 2nd half!

In the events leading up to the prayer meeting recorded in our first reading from Acts 4, Peter & John have also responded magnificently to their very challenging frontline encounters.

1. A ‘chance’ encounter with lame beggar - whom Peter & John heal
2. Then faced with a large gathered crowd - to whom Peter preaches convincingly that Jesus is risen from the dead and therefore the Messiah.
3. Then they are arrested, thrown into jail. And then they are hauled before the Sanhedrin – the Jewish ruling council - who order them to stop preaching about Jesus. Peter & John said *we can't stop preaching about Jesus: “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God.”*

The Sanhedrin don't dare hold them any longer, because so many people have witnessed the miraculous healing and so Peter & John are released.

Peter & John faced those very different challenges, with faithfulness and great courage – total commitment. And soon completely undaunted they are back in the temple courts again preaching about Jesus.

We have all sorts of different front lines and like Peter & John; they may include an individual with a very challenging problem asking for our help; or it may be a whole group of people around us who are watching us and are just a little curious about our Christian faith; or it may be others –sometimes those in authority over us - who are vocally hostile.

Even though your frontlines are unlikely to be as challenging as those of Peter & John, you may well

feel pretty unsure that you can face them as well.

So what was the secret of Peter & John's faithfulness, courage and commitment?

We see it right here in Acts 4 in what happens when they return to *their own people* v.23 – their home church. They report back and then the first thing they do is **pray**. They know that they cannot begin to face these frontline challenges in their own strength. They remember how clueless they were when they were with Jesus. I'm sure they were all too aware of how they had all run away when Jesus was arrested and Peter – how he had denied even knowing Jesus when he was challenged; even though it was just a servant girl. So they knew they had to pray.

In the early days, they had to ask Jesus *Lord teach us to pray* and we heard some of Jesus' teaching in the gospel reading when of course he teaches them the Lord's prayer. In Acts 4 they don't recite the Lord's prayer, but nevertheless their prayer follows *the principles* of the Lord's prayer. It can be the same for us. We can pray the Lord's prayer word for word – maybe to begin or sum up our prayers or pray it slowly – chewing over each phrase. Or we can use it as a pattern or template for our prayer, as the disciples do here:

So they begin, not as we might, by focusing on the fierce threat they had faced from the authorities, but by focusing on the greatness of God. *Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name. c.f.*

Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.

Then, as with the Lord's prayer, they focus on God's kingdom –

not *your kingdom come* – but the threat to God's kingdom: they recall scripture: Psalm 2: ²⁶ *The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.*"

Peter and John have just been personally threatened by the Sanhedrin, but for them that is not the issue, the issue is that the authorities are trying to oppose God's Kingdom. At the same time, they are reminding themselves that they shouldn't be surprised – it was ever thus: v.27: *Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.*

and they are also reminding themselves who's in charge: not King Herod, not the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, not the Jewish Sanhedrin - v.28:

They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen

Do you see how this gives them a completely different perspective?

From a human point of view, it was a disaster that Jesus was arrested and hauled before the Sanhedrin and then Herod and then Pilate. It was a disaster that Jesus was sentenced to a common criminal's execution, crucified, dead and buried. But the disciples now knew this was all part of God's plan. Facing all the evil of the world upon the cross was the way God planned for Jesus to defeat it and deal with our sin once and for all. The resurrection proved that this was God's purpose and He will always have the last word. This is why we can pray with confidence *Your Kingdom come*.

It's only then that the disciples focus on what they need: *Now, Lord, consider their threats...* but it's not *Please God keep us safe, please help the authorities to forget what we have done...* Their concern is that *God's will be done*. And what was God's will for them? To proclaim the gospel to all the world, to be witnesses to the love and living power of Christ first of all there in Jerusalem, and then in Judaea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. So they pray: ***enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.***

But that's not enough: Yes, they want God to enable them to do what God has called them to do, but they want to see *God* at work as well:

³⁰ *Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.'*

Now, how do you think they expected God to heal and do signs and wonders? Whilst they clearly knew that it was God who had to do it, they also knew that He would normally do it through them.

In the Lord's prayer they were taught to pray *Your will be done...on earth as in heaven*. This is exactly how Jesus worked: *John 5 v.19 "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."*

So for example when Jesus is faced with the paralysed man, let down through the roof, he would have been asking his heavenly Father “Father, what do you want to do for this man?” and receiving the answer “His greatest need is to be forgiven – and only then released from is paralysis”

And this exactly what Peter and John had done when accosted by the beggar at the Temple gate. I have no doubt that in their hearts they prayed *Lord what do you want to do here?* And I have no doubt they remembered what Jesus used to do in these situations: He certainly didn't ignore the beggars, nor did he give them any money – he probably never had any on him – after all do you remember when he sent the disciples out, he insisted they didn't take a purse with them? What he did do was take the individual seriously, heal them and then use the opportunity to proclaim the kingdom. And so Peter famously says to the beggar: *‘Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.’ Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong.*

In the same way remember how when Jesus met *Jairus' daughter, he cleared the room and then said ‘Little girl, get up’ or – we're told the actual words in Aramaic - ‘Talitha cum’ c.f. Acts 9 Peter taken to see dead Tabitha – he recalls what Jesus did and in the same way, he gets everyone out of the room and says ‘Tabitha, get up’ or ‘Tabitha cum’]*

How committed are you to seeing each encounter as an opportunity to proclaim the kingdom of God – in word or in deed? I don't mean getting on your soapbox or ramming the gospel down people's throats, but asking God *What do you want to do here? What do you want me to do...or say?*

It seems to me that the disciples were only able to see the opportunities that came their way and to respond to those opportunities and challenges so wonderfully, because it was their habit to pray prayers like this when they were back at base – and it's the same for us, whether that base is church on Sunday or in a quiet corner of our house at the beginning of each day.

By the way, today is Bible Sunday and it's good to point out that one of the reasons the disciples' prayer was so powerful is the way it bounces off scripture. It reflects the teaching of Jesus in the Lord's prayer, and then they recall Psalm 2. The more we read and chew on the Bible, the more it will shape our prayers and the more effective they will be. It also enables them to reflect on their recent experience of how God has already been at work.

And just look at how powerfully God answered that prayer:

³¹ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

“the place where they were meeting was shaken” There are occasions when the presence of God is so tangible, so powerful it seems the very air is humming, vibrating and everyone in the room is affected by it. : *reminded of this speaking on Friday with Peter Reis about the final evening meeting we had with him 2 years ago.*

The disciples' prayer – or I should say God's response to their prayer - has a transforming effect on the church: they share all their possessions, then we're told in *Acts 5 v.12: The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. ... more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. ¹⁵ As a result, people brought those who were ill 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. ¹⁶ Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing those who were ill and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.*

God has placed you on a frontline and he has a special role for you there, wherever it may be. For some it will be more challenging than for others, but whatever it is like, you cannot *begin* to fulfil that role – to proclaim God's kingdom in word and deed and love - in your own strength. All of us are dependent on God enabling and equipping us, by filling us again and again with his Holy Spirit. The question is *How committed are you to being used by God to proclaim his kingdom, to be a witness to his love and living presence?* And secondly, *How committed are you to asking for God's help in prayer?* Because if you are not committed to both these things, nothing will happen and our church will die. But if you do have that *Frontline commitment*, who knows what God might do through you, and through our church? Who knows what lives might be changed and transformed? And there is nothing on earth more exciting than when we begin to see that happen.

