

A Work of God or of Men?

In the name of our crucified and risen Lord, dear friends in Christ: Today's Gospel reading describes what can be considered the birth of the Christian Church, for here the resurrected Lord Jesus appears to his disciples and establishes the office of the holy ministry; that is, he hands over to them the keys of the kingdom of heaven, which is the authority to proclaim the Gospel and to forgive sins in his name and for the sake of his sacrifice. This is what the Church is all about: delivering people from sin and death by proclaiming the saving benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection. This, through the work of the Holy Spirit, is what enables the Church to make believers and cause them to grow in faith and godly virtue.

And the Church did grow, exponentially in the first few decades after it was born. And today's reading from Acts describes what we might call some early growing pains that it experienced in the process. The account we heard takes place some time not long after the Ascension of Jesus and the Day of Pentecost. You may remember that when the sun rose on Pentecost, the number of Christians in Jerusalem was only about 120. When the sun set that day, there were over 3000. And the Church continued to have added to it as many as were being saved.

So many, in fact, that it began to be a matter of grave concern for the Jewish authorities. They had thought that when they got Jesus out of the way, the movement surrounding him would fizzle and die. To their surprise, it didn't. And already there have been several episodes of conflict between them and those who continued to follow Jesus. It started one day when Peter and John were going into the Temple to pray. Near the gate was a beggar, a man who had been born lame; his legs either paralyzed or underdeveloped and useless. When he saw the two Apostles, he thought they were going to give him a couple of coins; but instead Peter said, "I haven't got any gold or silver; but what I do have, I'll give you." He reached down, took the man's hand and said, "In the name of Jesus, get up and walk!" And he did. His legs were made right in an instant. And more than just walk, the man began dancing, hopping around, and running this way and that, so overjoyed was he with the gift he'd been given. His shouts of glee soon drew a crowd of onlookers who recognized him as the man they'd seen for years begging at the gate. They were astonished. And they could see that the guy was fawning all over Peter and John and giving them full credit for his miraculous restoration. With their mouths hanging open in amazement, they stared at the two Apostles.

Peter said to them, "Don't look at us like we're miracle workers; this is the work of Jesus who was crucified and whom God raised to life again." He began proclaiming the Gospel to them right there on the Temple courts. Well, it happened that a group of priests and Sadducees came upon them. They were infuriated; first because the Apostles were talking about Jesus, and second because they were proclaiming the resurrection of the dead (a teaching that Sadducees really hated). They had the two Apostles arrested on the spot and put in jail. The next day they stood trial before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews.

The High Priest demanded to know how the beggar was healed. Peter answered, "Let me see if I've got this right: we spent the night in jail and are now on trial *for healing a man?* You know how crazy that sounds? But since you ask, the man was healed in the name of Jesus, whom you crucified and God raised to life. Salvation is found in no other name than his." Well, the council didn't like that at all; but they were in a bind. They couldn't deny the miracle,

and no crime had been committed. They had to release the Apostles; but before they did they ordered them to stop talking to people about Jesus. The two Apostles replied, “Sorry, but we answer to a higher authority. We must speak about these things we’ve seen and heard.”

If anything, this brief brush with the ruling council emboldened the Apostles. Afterward, the whole group of them could be found teaching about Jesus in the Temple on a daily basis. They were winning converts right and left, right under the noses of the men who ordered them to stop talking about Jesus. The council met again. They knew they had to do something, so they sent guards to arrest the Apostles a second time. All of them were thrown into the jail. But in the night, an angel came and released them. He told them to go right back to the Temple and keep doing what they had been.

When the council met in the morning, they sent guards to bring the Apostles from the jail to stand trial before them. The guards found the jail locked up tight, but no one inside. They went back to the council and reported the escape. As the whole council sat scratching their heads wondering how their prisoners got away, someone came and reported, “Those men you arrested? They’re in the Temple again, preaching about Jesus.” The audacity of the Apostles really got them hot under the collar. They sent the guards to arrest them again; but this time the guards did so a lot more gingerly. They could see that those who were listening to the Apostles were not at all happy that their teachers were being taken away.

So now the Apostles stand before the council. For Peter and John, it’s the second time around. The High Priest thunders at them, “We charged you with strict orders to stop talking about *this name*” (He couldn’t bring himself to let the name of Jesus pass his lips). All of this is the lead up to today’s reading from Acts. Speaking for the Apostles, Peter replies, “We must obey God rather than men.” This is an important principle worthy of a sermon on its own. As Christians, we are called to respect those who are in authority, and to comply with all of the laws of the land—*unless*, unless those laws go against something God has commanded. At that point we have to say “No. God’s laws are higher than yours. We cannot and will not comply. And we are prepared to suffer the consequences.” Like I said, that’s worthy of a sermon of its own; but I’ll have to save it for another time.

What I’d like to get to this morning is the council’s reaction to Peter’s bold proclamation of the Gospel. He accuses the leaders of being guilty of Jesus’ death; but he also holds out the promise of forgiveness for anyone who repents and trusts that Jesus is the Savior whom God sent. As we heard, they didn’t receive the message well. Instead it filled them with fury. They wanted to kill the Apostles then and there; but they lacked the authority to do it. The same legal restriction that forced them to go to Pilate, the Roman governor, to have Jesus crucified prevented them doing what they wanted. No doubt some of them were trying to figure out what charges they could lay against the Apostles that might stick in a Roman court; but the prospects could not have looked good. Their case against Jesus was won by intimidation, not by law. And now they were going to bring 12 guys up on similar grounds? Not likely.

So, as they’re all shouting at one another in confusion and cursing the Apostles, a highly respected Pharisee named Gamaliel stands up and calls for order. When things quiet down, he asks that the men on trial be put outside for a bit while he addresses the council. And what he advises is caution. “Take care what you are about to do to these men.” He proceeds to remind them of two fairly recent historical examples of men who arose to become leaders of rebel movements, one Theudas and Judas the Galilean. In both cases, the leader was killed and afterward their followers were soon dispersed. Their grand causes came to nothing. In view of this, Gamaliel continues, “Keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or

undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found to be opposing God.”

There's ring of wisdom to these words. As we heard, the council decided to take his advice – but not entirely: they did beat the Apostles and order them again to not speak in the name of Jesus. They couldn't resist, it seems. But what I want to point out is that as wise as Gamaliel's words were, it was only a form of worldly wisdom. He was not speaking a divine truth. What I mean is this: just because something succeeds does not mean that God is behind it. Take Islam or Mormonism: each of them was started by just one man who claimed to be a prophet of God. Both movements came under certain degrees of opposition. And both eventually overcame that opposition to become what might be called successful – at least in the eyes of the world. But God has nothing to do with either of these faiths. They are both deceptions that lead people straight to hell. Success in this world is no proof that God is behind a plan or undertaking.

Related to this notion is the idea that if God is behind something, then everything about it meets with his approval. This was the argument made by many at the time of the Reformation. Because doctrines like those about purgatory and the authority and infallibility of the pope, and practices like the worship of saints, the sale of indulgences, and the adoration of relics had become mainstream traditions accepted by the Church, those who advocated them said that they must be okay. The Church belongs to God, so everything the Church does must be right. Who cares if it flatly contradicts Scripture? We see something similar today with some of the evangelism techniques that churches employ. No gimmick however goofy or questionable is off limits as long as it draws a crowd that might lead someone to hear the Gospel. They say, “If it succeeds, it must be all right with the Lord.” No. It doesn't work that way.

On the flip side, just because God *is* behind something, doesn't mean it's going to succeed. God is behind the Gospel of Jesus Christ, after all. It's his desire that all people come to embrace its saving truth. But not all people do. Some stubbornly resist the work of the Holy Spirit. They refuse to repent and believe the good news. And in the end the Lord will be forced to say to them, “Not my will, but *yours* be done.” Or again, God is behind the Church and its saving message. He wants it to thrive and grow; but congregations sometimes die, true believers can be led astray by false doctrines or fall into unrepentant sin. It happens. And when it does, God experiences failure. The things he wants to happen don't. The work he wants to accomplish goes undone.

So, as wise as Gamaliel's words seemed to be, the simple truth is that he was wrong. Still, from his worldly wise way of seeing things, I have to wonder if he wasn't struggling with some doubts himself. He was part of the group that arranged the death of Jesus – something he approved of when it happened. And he knew very well that Jesus had been killed. There was no question about that. What he couldn't account for was that Jesus still had followers – followers who remained very much devoted to their Master and his teachings. They claimed he was alive again. And they were performing miracles in his name, miracles that gave every evidence of being the work of God and not of mere men. Gamaliel warned the council that they might be found to be opposing God. He had to be suspecting that's exactly what he was doing himself, and perhaps that's why he urged caution. It's unknown whether he became a Christian later, though we can certainly hope that he did.

It's worth noting, however, that Gamaliel's most famous student flatly rejected his teacher's advice; so did the council in the end. Later they declared war on the Christians, and a young man named Saul of Tarsus, who had studied the Scriptures under Gamaliel according to

the tradition of the Pharisees, was commissioned to arrest all those who confessed the name of Jesus as Savior. He was the spearhead of the council's effort to destroy the Christian Church. Ironically, the work of men to get rid of the Church only caused it to grow, because when the persecutions started, many believers fled. And wherever they went, they took the Good News of salvation through faith in Jesus with them. Through them and their message, the Holy Spirit worked to make new converts. Communities of believers started cropping up everywhere. Saul was on a mission to stamp out the one that sprang up in Damascus when he found that he was opposing God. You may recall that the risen Lord Jesus appeared to him told him so in a rather abrupt and frightful way. And thus by the work of God, Saul, who had been a leading enemy of the Gospel became its most ardent proponent. He went from doing the work of sinful men to doing the work of God.

And, of course, that's what we want to be about also: doing the work of God. And what is God's work? When Jesus was asked this question, he answered, "The work of God is this: that you believe in the One he sent." It really is that simple. God desires to save people by bringing them to faith in Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord. And for this reason he has instituted the ministry of his Church. Through this ministry, the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, God makes and keeps people believers in Jesus. It's God's work, not man's; but God uses people to do it. We are not called to judge whether this work is successful or not. We are called to be faithful: to stand on the Words and promises God revealed through his Son and that he has spoken through his prophets and Apostles. We are called to reject all other teachings in spiritual matters regardless of how wise, attractive, or successful they may appear to be.

Therefore let us be about God's work: trusting in Jesus by the power of his Word, that we may obtain what God desires for us, the salvation of our souls. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!