

ONLY TRUTH CAN PRODUCE LASTING PEACE!

Today's Text: Acts 4: 1-22

Extracts:

Now as [Peter and John] spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, being *greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them and put them in custody until the next day...* And it came to pass, on the next day, that [the leaders set Peter and John before the Sanhedrin and] asked, “By what power or by what name have you done this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit said to them, “... let it be known to you all... that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth... by Him this man stands here before you whole.”... And *seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it... So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them [Acts 4: 1-3, 5-8, 10, 14, 21].*

On Friday, 10 February 2012, Sudan and South Sudan signed a non-aggression pact at crisis talks mediated by the ex-President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki.¹ Both countries agreed to respect each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Until July last year, South Sudan was part of Sudan. The Christian South had voted in a referendum to split from the Islamic North after decades of civil war in which over 1.5 million people died. Even with independence, relations deteriorated, forcing the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon to voice his concern for both parties to reach an early compromise. But will this new pact produce lasting peace?

Given their antecedents, it may not. But economic realities may force both sides to keep the peace. South Sudan obtains 98% of its budget funding from oil which is still piped through the North to foreign markets. The North needs transit fees from such pipes to finance 36% of its budget. They both need each other to survive- at least in the short run.

There is something there for us to learn as we strive for lasting peace in our relations with other people. It is that only truth can produce lasting peace. In this week's Bible story, the Jewish leaders arrested Peter and John for disturbing public peace. Exactly what was at stake and how was the matter resolved? Did it guarantee lasting peace? Let us find out from this week's interesting study

¹ Based on “Sudan and South Sudan sign peace act, says Thabo Mbeki,” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16994007> , 11 Feb. 2012

1. **Background: Truth disturbs peace!**

Ordinarily, peace can mean the absence or end of war, strife or uproar. It marks *a period of calm or absence of anxiety*. The Bible also talks of the peace of God that surpasses human understanding [**Phil. 4: 7**]. Yet, a common cliché states that if you want peace, you must prepare for war. But conquest can be the outcome of war which may only produce graveyard peace! Does that suggest that peace is unattainable or elusive? Is that why we hear of wars or rumours of wars all over the world today? The war may be military (as between nations) or religious (as between faiths) or socio-economic (as between classes or ethnic groups). What will it take to produce lasting peace, the kind that God has promised? That is our main topic this week.

Right now, many of us have no peace of mind. Anxiety rules our day and sleeplessness takes over at night. In the family and on the job, we have no peace. Even when we stay on our own, trouble-makers will still come and disturb our peace. For example, the worshippers in the Catholic Church near the Nigerian Federal Capital, Abuja, did not expect the bomb attack on them by the Islamic Boko Haram terrorists last Christmas. The soccer-loving fans that died in a recent riot at a stadium during a local soccer match in Egypt did not anticipate what befell them. Some families are dealing with domestic violence or economic hardship or illness and so on. Such matters disrupt the calm and harmony we all cherish. Therefore, the issue of lasting peace matters to us all.

In this week's Bible story, the disciples of Jesus did something that the religious leaders considered to be a major threat to their peace. How did they go about dealing with the matter? Here are the key aspects to note:

a) The Sanhedrin's definition of peace

The Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish council in ancient Jerusalem at the time, was made up of political and religious leaders and presided over by the high priest. Any threat to peace would attract more repression from the Roman governor and that could erode their dwindling influence over the people. That was why they laid hands on Peter and John and put them in custody until the following day for trial for breaching public peace

The Jewish religious leaders were greatly disturbed that the disciples "taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection of the dead" [**Acts 4: 1-2**]. To them, that was blasphemy and a threat to public law and order. From their own perspective, the threat of Jesus of Nazareth had been effectively removed with His crucifixion and death on the cross in Jerusalem almost two months

back. They had even got the then Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, to seal His tomb and set guards over it [Matt. 27: 62-66]. Even when some of the guards came back to them with the “fairy tale” that Jesus had risen from the dead, they bribed them to lie that, while they were asleep, His disciples came to steal His body away! They even promised to appease the governor on their behalf. That version of the life and death of Jesus was the commonly held “truth” at the time of the story we are examining right now [Matt. 28: 11-15]. *Therefore, in the view of the religious leaders, peace meant no mention of Jesus at all to the people, not to talk of miracles being performed in His name.*

b) *Peter’s definition of truth*

The miraculous healing of the lame man at the temple gate brought about five thousand new believers into the rapidly growing church [Acts 4: 4]. When Peter and John were asked at their trial before the Sanhedrin the following morning by what power or by what name the lame man was made whole, Peter boldly declared, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel, ...let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by *the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole*” [vv. 5-10]. Peter did not stop there. He told the council that [Acts 4: 11-12]:

- Jesus Christ is the stone mentioned by the Psalmist [Ps. 118: 22] as rejected by builders but that has become the chief cornerstone; and
- There is no salvation in any other name (than Jesus’) “for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

c) *Could the leaders’ solution produce lasting peace?*

The leaders marvelled at the apostles’ boldness, especially as they knew that Peter and John were uneducated and untrained men. Nevertheless, they recognized that they had been with Jesus [v. 13]. They noted that a major miracle had occurred and there were numerous witnesses to confirm it. They, therefore, decided to caution them not to “speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.” Peter and John replied, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than God, you judge, for *we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard*” [Acts 4: 14-20].

The disciples did not look like succumbing to intimidation and persecution because they ***had empirically verifiable evidence of truth on their side***. So, “finding no way of punishing them, because of ***the people*** [who] ***glorified God for what had been done,***” they let them go [v. 21]!

From the foregoing, we can conclude that ***some semblance of peace was procured between the disciples and the Sanhedrin for a while but it did not last. The more powerful and threatened Jews and Roman rulers used the instrument of state coercion to persecute the weaker party, the church over a long time. In the end, truth trumped power!*** That is the kind of peace we should all seek.

2. Ways of promoting peace

Peace can be promoted in many ways, some of which are as follows:

a) *By deception*

In this case, ***one party cons the other side to accept peace terms***. The accepting party may not have full knowledge of the terms or details of the agreement leading to peace settlement until it becomes too late. A good example was the treaty that Joshua and the Jewish leaders signed with the Gibeonites after the fall of Jericho and Ai [**Josh. 9: 1-21**]. The people of Gibeon “worked craftily and went and pretended to be ambassadors” from a far country to make a covenant with the children of Israel. They took old sacks, wore old garments and carried dry and moldy bread to make the point. Without checking first with God who had commanded Joshua and his troops to destroy the idolatrous inhabitants of the Promised Land, Joshua and the elders signed a treaty of peace with them. They were shocked later to discover that Gibeon was only three days’ journey away from them. The deed had been done. The Jews could no longer kill them!

How many of us have been deceived into marriage or business deals that are now giving us sleepless nights? ***Deception can NEVER produce lasting peace. Instead, it could lead to painful rifts and breakups.***

b) *By conquest*

The commonest way that people or nations attempt to procure peace is to go to war and try to conquer the other party. The war may take the form of actual fighting (as in the case of the Americans against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001). It

may take the form of bosses using their reward and punishment powers to prey on their helpless subordinates. In all such cases, there may be outright victory for the stronger party but you may only have the peace of the graveyard. For example, the Taliban were driven out but America has not known any peace in Afghanistan! The Arab Spring of 2011 has swept off a good number of repressive dictators that had been under the impression for decades that their regimes were safe and loved by their “peaceful” citizens!

During the time of the prophet Samuel, the Philistines fought against Israel, defeated the Israelite army and seized the ark of God. They rejoiced that they had conquered a stubborn enemy. However, God struck the Philistines with a series of plagues that forced them to return the ark with sacrifices [**1 Sam. Chaps 5-6**]
Conquest can only give you temporary respite but may never guarantee you lasting peace.

c) *By compromise*

Sometimes, in the spirit of give-and-take, the two warring parties may agree to meet half-way and accept a settlement that can bring acceptable peace to both sides. However such outcomes can be good or bad for peace. A bad example was the case of the children of Israel who forced Aaron to make them a god to worship after Moses had delayed his return from the mountain where he had gone to receive the Ten Commandments. Aaron could have refused their request because it was offensive to God. However, to placate the people, he used their gold earrings to make a golden calf that the people proclaimed as the god that brought them out of Egypt. The people rejoiced and there was peace but it did not last. God visited them with a heavy punishment and three thousand of them died in just one day [**Ex. 32: 1-28**].

A good compromise was the case of the children of the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh who built an altar by the Jordan contrary to the requirement for all Israel to worship by the altar at Shiloh. The other tribes gathered to make war against the dissidents. However, before doing so, they sent a delegation, led by Phinehas, the son of Eleazer the priest, to find out the facts. As soon as they were able to establish that it was not an altar for sacrifice but as a mark of their affinity to their kith and kin on the other side of the river, war was averted. The altar remained as a mere witness and both parties were pleased and blessed God [**Josh. 22: 10-34**].

Nevertheless, compromise cannot always produce lasting peace, especially if it is based on political correctness. Light and darkness cannot mix. You are either hot or cold. If you are lukewarm, God will spew you out of His mouth [**Rev. 3: 15-16**]. That was the situation that Peter and John faced with the Jewish leaders.

d) *By conviction*

In this case, both parties accept the outcome even though they may not be happy about it. They believe that there is irrefutable evidence (factual and truthful) to make warring futile or unnecessary. Such a settlement is bound to last.

Take the case of the dispute among the apostles and elders in the Jerusalem council over the admission of Gentiles without requiring them to first be circumcised like Jewish converts from Judaism. Paul and Barnabas reported the outcome of their missionary journey and the miracles among the Gentile communities they had met. On the other hand, some Pharisees that had become believers insisted on circumcising them before bringing them into the fold. After a long debate, James, the brother of the Lord and one of the pillars of that council, stood up and, using the Scriptures, he convinced his listeners that salvation is by grace and not by works. The whole council was pleased and a letter was signed which Paul gladly carried back to Antioch [**Acts 15: 6-31**].

Clearly, we can conclude that only truth can produce conviction which can in turn promote and produce lasting peace. That was the point that Peter was trying to make during his trial in the Sanhedrin.

3. **Conclusion: Only Jesus Christ can give you eternal peace!**

In one of the discourses before His departure to heaven, Jesus told His disciples, “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world” [**Jn 16: 33**]. The peace of Christ comes to you through the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth that can guide you to all truth [**v. 13**] and convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment [**v. 8**]. That was why, in spite of persecution, “the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied” [**Acts 9: 31**]. *Jesus is the way, the truth and the life* [**Jn 14: 6**]. *Only His truth can produce lasting peace in your life.*