

TALKING POINTS 4

Sunday, Day 19 (John 21:15-19)

How would you feel if your Mum picked you up from school and in front of your school friends referred to you as her “little lamb” or as her “sweet sheep”? I suspect you would be highly embarrassed.

But Jesus knew that shepherds were seen every day in Bible times. He knew that King David’s most famous poem compared God to a shepherd (Ps 23). He had described himself as the ‘good shepherd’ (John 10:11). Now Jesus chose to use the shepherd idea again.

After the breakfast on the beach next to the lake, Jesus invited Peter to walk with him. I imagine Peter was a bit nervous, just as we would be if a teacher called us out and we suspect we are in trouble. Peter probably wondered if Jesus was going to send him away as useless because he had denied him.

Three times Jesus asked him, “Do you love me?” (Peter had denied Jesus three times.) Each time Peter tried to make it clear that he loved Jesus very much indeed. Each time, Jesus told Peter to show his love by feeding and caring for his flock. Peter knew that Jesus was not talking about real sheep, but that he was to care for Jesus’ followers. Peter was to be their shepherd now that Jesus was going to go back to his Father in heaven.

Why did Jesus choose Peter? We don’t know! But Jesus knew that Peter was just the right person to hold things together in those first uncertain days when Jesus would no longer be there. It wasn’t going to be an easy job. It wasn’t going to be an easy life – Jesus warns Peter that he will be taken prisoner and eventually killed because he is following Jesus. But Peter knew that Jesus would give him the courage he needed.

I am sure Peter never forgot that day. He left that beach forgiven, sure of Jesus’ love and with a new sense of purpose.

Jesus wants to have the same kind of chat with us. He longs to forgive us for the wrong things we do; he really wants us to know that he loves us and he wants to show us the plans he has for our lives. We won’t walk beside a lake with Jesus; we won’t hear an actual voice, but we will know deep within us that Jesus is there.

But, if we don’t listen, he can’t speak to us. Like the boy Samuel, we need to say “Speak Lord” I am listening (1 Sam 3:10). And, like Peter and Samuel, we need to listen each day.

Monday, Day 20 (Acts 2:38-42)

The first four books of the New Testament tell us what happened during Jesus' life on earth. (See if you can name them and, if not, learn them: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.)

The next book, Acts tells the dramatic story of what happened next. Peter's name appears often in the first chapters for his job as a leader really started as soon as Jesus went back into heaven on Ascension Day.

We know that until he met Jesus, Peter had been a fisherman. This meant that he would have known a huge amount about fish and bait and nets, but he certainly didn't know much about public speaking or organising others. We have on record that when people met him they realised that he was an "uneducated and ordinary" man (Acts 4:13). The leaders of society must have wondered why Peter had been chosen to care for Jesus' followers! Why hadn't Jesus chosen someone with more education, more 'polish', more skill with people?

But God's ways of doing things are not the same as ours. Peter, like all Jewish boys of his day, had been taught by the rabbis (The leaders in the Jewish religion). This meant that he knew and could probably quote many parts of the Old Testament. God knew that Peter loved Jesus deeply and that he understood that those old stories were preparing people for Jesus. God also knew that Peter had learnt that he wasn't strong enough to cope all on his own. Peter had seen his own weakness when he denied Jesus. He knew that he needed Jesus to guide his thinking and his plans. The very first time his name is mentioned in Acts is in chapter 1: 13-14 and we see that he was praying!

So, instead of being a scaredy-cat, locked up in a room, hiding from soldiers, Peter was brave enough to stand up and teach people about Jesus! And Peter the uneducated was able to teach wisely! On one day, Peter, the ordinary fisherman, convinced 3000 people that Jesus was the Son of God.

That is an amazing change! The secret was that Peter wasn't making the plans; he was letting Jesus work through him.

And Jesus has done the same thing over and over again throughout history. Hundreds of ordinary men and women have become messengers of the good news about Jesus in hundreds of different places and ways. For this is how God works.

We are part of his team too, no matter who we are. If we love him and listen to him we are already in training!

Tuesday, Day 21 (Acts 3:1-11)

By now many of us are sick of being in lockdown. Maybe that feeling can help us to understand how the man in this story felt. Since his birth he had been unable to walk; his friends had to carry him to the temple every day so he could beg. He had no job, no independence. He wasn't even able to go into the temple to worship God. And Dr Luke tells us later that the man was over 40! That is a long, long lockdown.

There is no suggestion in the story that the man or Peter and John felt that this day was going to be different. The beggar sat in his usual spot and, just as he always did, asked for money. I am sure he wasn't the only ill person in Jerusalem that day either.

Yet, God focussed Peter's attention on him and gave Peter the desire and power to act in Jesus' name. As a result, the man was not just given the ability to walk; he was also made strong enough to walk immediately – even though he had never used those muscles before. No wonder people stopped and stared and made a noise about it. No wonder the man is seen to be “walking and leaping and praising God”.

Peter must have been amazed at the power which flowed through him. Peter realised that this healing gift was given by God so that he could care for people – as he had been told.

Peter knew that there were people watching and listening who hated the fact that he healed in Jesus' name. But he was probably still rather shocked when he and John were seized and locked up in the cells overnight. Peter wasn't used to this kind of life. He had kept out of trouble all his life, yet now he was in prison.

I am sure he and John prayed and prayed as they sat there. I suspect they may have prayed for safety. I am very sure, however, that their main prayer was for courage to use the opportunity to teach others that Jesus was God's risen Son. Peter was no longer scared. Instead He was on fire for Jesus.

What about us? Do we ask “What would Jesus do?” before we decide to act? Like Peter, this is a lesson we have to learn if we really want to be on fire for Jesus.

Wednesday, Day 22 (Acts 4:1-7, 13-15, 21)

The next morning, Peter and John were dragged out of prison to appear before the Jewish religious rulers. They probably hadn't had much breakfast or much of a wash and they had no lawyers.

Peter and John wanted to get out of jail. But they knew they must use the occasion to tell the leaders about Jesus and God gave them the key message they needed.

The court wasn't concerned that the man had been healed. That was a fact and couldn't be changed. They were very worried, however, that the healing was done through Jesus. After all they had killed Jesus to stop his ideas – and here his name and his ideas were being used to heal somebody!

Peter made it quite clear that, although the leaders had killed him, Jesus was alive again. He pointed out that the leaders were going to displease God if they didn't believe in Jesus.

The leaders had always been the ones who knew about God. Imagine how shocked they were that an "uneducated and ordinary" person was telling them that they were wrong! Furious, they told the prisoners that they were never to speak or teach about Jesus again.

But Peter and John weren't scared. God gave them the courage to ask a very clever question: "Must we listen to you or to God?" That trapped the leaders. They couldn't suggest they were more important than God, could they? And, while the leaders blushed and mumbled, Peter explained that they had to talk about what they had seen and heard. Angrily, the leaders decided all they could do was threaten the men and let them go. If they had punished them, the people who were praising God for the miracle would have rioted!

I am sure some of those leaders must have thought deeply about Peter's words. Who knows whether some of them didn't start to follow Jesus that very day?

And who are we listening to: God or humans? If we are not letting God direct us, we are in deep danger of going wrong – just as many of those Jewish leaders did.

Thursday, Day 23 (Acts 4:32-37)

Today's story is a scary one which is why you probably haven't heard it before.

The first Christians were so thrilled to hear that God loved them that they decided to live differently. To show that God loved everybody equally, they decided to share everything they had equally among all Jesus' followers. This meant that "there was not a needy person among them".

For example, a man called Barnabas sold a field and brought all the money he made to be shared out.

One of the other members, a man called Ananias, saw how people respected Barnabas for what he had done. Ananias wanted people to feel the same way about him, so he also sold some property and gave a big donation to the Christian family. However, he and his wife didn't want to give all their money away. They decide to lie – to pretend to hand over all the money, but actually to keep some of it for themselves.

When Ananias arrived with the money, God alerted Peter to what they had done. Peter reminded Ananias that he didn't have to give any of his money away, if he didn't want to. Yet Ananias had tried to lie to God, by pretending to be honest and generous. When Ananias realised what he had done, he "fell down and died" right there, in front of everyone.

Three hours later Sapphira, Ananias' wife, came in. Peter asked her about the amount of money that Ananias had brought to the church. She also lied about the selling price. And, when Peter pointed out that she was lying to God, she also fell down and died.

Imagine how those deaths shocked everyone who saw or heard about them. This was a good lesson for those early believers. It reminded them that God is holy, perfectly good and without sin. Those who love him ought to try to live that way too. Yes, God forgives us because Jesus was punished in our place. But this doesn't mean we can plot to do evil.

We serve a powerful God and must not be casual about it. He loves us, but he also knows all about us and sees what we plan. He expects us to try to follow his ways in everything we do. He is not fooled when we only pretend to love him as Ananias and Sapphira did.

Friday, Day 24 (Acts 5:17-27)

The Jewish leaders who had told Peter and John not to speak about Jesus got very upset that they were not being obeyed. They were terribly jealous that the people were listening to Peter and the other disciples (now called apostles) more than they were to them.

So guess what they did? They arrested them again, leaving them in prison overnight before the court appearance. But they were in for a shock. When the police went to the prison to fetch the apostles for the trial the next morning, everything looked normal. The prison doors were locked; the guards were on duty; but they were guarding an empty prison! Very puzzled, the police reported this to the Jewish leaders. And even as they were speaking, someone came running in to tell them that the 'prisoners' were preaching in the temple! How embarrassing for the Jewish leaders!

God had sent an angel to free the prisoners, telling them to go and preach again. Of course, the Jewish leaders had them re-arrested immediately. I am sure the apostles were expecting this to happen! So, instead of preaching to the ordinary people, Peter preached about Jesus to the Jewish leaders.

They were furious and wanted to kill the men. However, one of the wiser old men, Gamaliel, warned them to think carefully before acting. If this really was God's work, nothing they could do to his messengers would stop the news spreading; if this was not God's work, the ideas would fade away, never to be heard of again.

Isn't that proof that the good news the apostles were spreading really was true? Here we are 2000 years later and we can still hear and read the good news about Jesus who died for us! Over the centuries millions of people have heard the good news – it has definitely not faded away!

Yet, like Jesus, the apostles suffered for telling the news of God's love. Instead of killing them, the Jewish leaders ordered that they be flogged (beaten cruelly) and warned them not to preach again. The apostles were so thrilled to be part of God's family that they were happy to be beaten! And, as a result of their suffering, more and more people heard the good news about Jesus.

In these days of lockdown, it is good to remind ourselves that God gives strength to those who love him. Many people are reading their Bibles or listening to church services on-line and they are thinking and talking about God. They are discovering that these old stories are not just stories, but are proof that Jesus is alive in 2020. Let us pray that they will come to trust him in these days of trouble for the world.

Saturday, Day 25 (Acts 6:8-15)

Jesus had told Peter to care for his family, but this did not mean that Peter was the only one who could share the good news. One of the others who did was a man called Stephen.

Stephen had not been one of the disciples but had been chosen as a helper. His main job was to ensure that the food parcels were being fairly distributed. (Sound familiar, doesn't it!) But, pretty soon, people realised that Stephen loved Jesus so much that he was also able to help and to teach them.

When non-believers tried to argue with him about Jesus, God gave him the answers and the non-believers just couldn't win any arguments. This made them so jealous that they plotted against him. When they lied about him to the Jewish leaders, Stephen was arrested and dragged before the council to be tried.

However, instead of shaking and shivering with fear, we are told that Stephen looked like an angel as he stood there. God was giving him peace and joy despite what was happening to him. When he was given the chance to speak, Stephen gave everyone in the court room a Bible history lesson! He reminded them how God had been with Abraham, Joseph and Moses. Then he reminded them how many of God's messengers had been persecuted and ignored. Everyone listened politely because they knew that all this was true.

But then Stephen explained that this wasn't just ancient history. Those listening to him had also ignored and maltreated God's most special messenger – God's son. The Messiah.

Suddenly the court room erupted into chaos. How dare Stephen suggest that Jesus was more special than Abraham or Moses! The people were so angry that they didn't wait for the trial to finish. They grabbed Stephen, dragged him out of the city and threw big stones at him until he died. Stephen was the first person to die because he followed Jesus.

But this didn't stop the family from growing. Stephen's words and behaviour made it clear that Jesus was alive and that he was with Stephen as he died.

Death was no longer terrifying when Jesus was there to comfort him. Stephen knew that it was only his body which was being killed. He knew he would live for ever in God's kingdom, for Jesus had beaten death.

What a great reminder for Christians in every age!