

*One name under heaven*

If there is one word that might describe our reading from the Book of Acts this morning, that word is ‘offensive’. What the passage describes here is loaded with offense, both in its original context and also for us who read it today. So what a great passage to dive into, and let’s just draw out the offense and then see what we can make of it.

So, beginning with the original context, what we are dealing with in this passage is the first occasion on which Christians have been dragged before the political authorities and accused and questioned concerning their faith. It’s all because in the previous chapter two of Jesus’ disciples, Peter and John, have healed a lame beggar, and what we are witnessing here is the early days after Jesus’ resurrection when the power of the newly risen Lord is breaking out around the disciples and extraordinary things are happening. Now the problem is that Peter and John insist that it was by the name of Jesus of Nazareth who God had resurrected that this man was raised. ‘In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand up and walk!’ Peter had ordered, and suddenly that beggar was dancing and leaping and praising God. And for Peter the name of Jesus is crucial – and powerful. ‘In the name of Jesus, stand up and walk!’, and later Peter testifies to the authorities that it is ‘by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong.’

This, however, was profoundly problematic to the Jewish authorities who had been partly responsible for the death of Jesus of Nazareth and for whom his name was accursed. And it was accursed first of all to the aristocratic party that had great power in the politics of the day and that were known as Sadducees. They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, so what were they to make of a healing done in the name of someone allegedly resurrected by God? But worse still, quite apart from the sensitivities of the Sadducees, it is very disturbing when miraculous healings are attributed to someone who you have executed as a heretic and blasphemer! In fact it was more than problematic – it was downright offensive. This Jesus of Nazareth, this pretend Messiah, had been executed by crucifixion – the most accursed and despised way of despatching people

that was possible. How could God resurrect a crucified criminal? And how could healings be done in his name?

For Peter and John, therefore, the name of Jesus spelt new life, while for the Jewish authorities it was a scandal and an offense and they determined to resist Peter and John and to shut them up. And of course down the centuries the name of Jesus has been considered offensive and has been opposed and resisted by authorities and really we should expect nothing else. When a group of people proclaim that Jesus and not Caesar is Lord, or that Jesus and not the state is Lord, or that Jesus and not some privileged elite is Lord, then we should not be surprised when they find themselves in trouble. And that of course is the case still in places today where to own the name of Jesus may put your life in jeopardy. And we should not be surprised. Indeed our surprise should really be that we have it so easy. To quote the words of the Marxist and literary critic Terry Eagleton, strong advocate of the Christian faith: ‘If you follow Jesus and don’t end up dead, you’ve got some explaining to do.’ And we might ask what we have done to the faith to make it so innocuous and harmless.

For us, however, we who live more comfortably in parts of the world that were once described as ‘Christian’, the real offense is not the claim that salvation might come through this 1<sup>st</sup> century crucified Galilean criminal. For us good, tolerant, enlightened liberals the offence lies elsewhere in this passage. I refer, of course, to where it says ‘There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved’. This, is where the offence really hits in our modern, multi-faith world. How dare we make exclusive claims for Christ! Enough damage has been done by religious adherents who believe that they have a unique hot-line to God and who insist upon inflicting their opinions upon others. What arrogance! And endless wars and *jihad* has been the result of this kind of exclusivity and we enlightened, broad-minded people have had enough of it.

Now, this is a subject that I have preached on before, and given that we have a fair turnover of people attending this church, and given the importance of this topic at a time when we are very aware of other faiths, I think it’s something that I need to address regularly. So I am going to give you my take on this and as with everything that gets said from this pulpit

you are free to disagree and I am only too aware every time I ascend those stairs that I may be wrong!

Firstly, something that is often said in opposition to exclusive claims about the name of Jesus saved is that different faiths are all different paths to God. So there are many spiritual teachers who can equally well instruct us in the things of God and Jesus is just one of many. There is nothing absolute about him. So we may pray to Jesus but there are also many other names we can call on. Now that is all very well and it seems very reasonable, but my difficulty is that I do not believe that Jesus would recognise himself in this description. I think we are in danger of misrepresenting Jesus' own self-understanding. He simply would not have seen himself as just one more spiritual teacher.

Jesus, you see, saw himself as part of a long tradition, going back centuries. And at the heart of that tradition was a belief that God had chosen Israel to be his unique people. Israel was chosen out of all the nations of the earth, for no particular reason, but in order that God might be revealed to the world through their life and witness. That is not to say that God was not at work in other nations, or that other nations knew nothing of God. But there was something special and unique about God's relationship with Israel. And that is the story by which Jesus understood himself. He clearly believed that he now had a crucial part to play in that Israel-shaped story – and indeed that he could only be understood in the light of it. So take him out of the context of that story and say that he is just one spiritual guide among many is to miss the point and I think Jesus would have objected to it. In that ancient story Israel had uniqueness written all over it and Jesus as the climax of that story has uniqueness written all over him. And reject that story if you wish, but beware of extracting Jesus from it and making him fit another story about many paths to God.

So as a Christian I maintain that there is indeed only one name by which we must be saved and that name is Jesus, and if that is offensive – well, the faith has been offensive right from the start. But – and here is the big question – does that mean, however, that only Christians are saved? Does it mean that only Christians have the truth? And here I would want to make a distinction between Christ on the one hand and Christians and the Church in the other. And I would want to say that

Christ cannot be confined to the Church and to Christians! That is to limit and to restrict him. Christ is present and at work even where he goes unrecognised and unconfessed! As the great Christian apologist C S Lewis once said, ‘We... know that no one can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.’ And who knows how Christ may be present and at work in people of other faiths, or people who do not know his name, or people who have no faith at all?

I think it is significant this morning that we also read from John’s Gospel for John, surely, has the most universal vision of Jesus. In that sublime prologue that begins his Gospel he speaks of Christ in cosmic terms. And he refers to him as the life that is the light of all people – yes, the light of all people! And he says that the light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world. Yes, the light that enlightens everyone! So yes, that light shines out of Christians and out of the church, even though sometimes pretty weakly and pretty poorly, but certainly not exclusively from Christians and the church. And our attitude to other faiths and to people of no faith should be, ‘so where is the light of Christ shining here?’ And sometimes it may be shining there a good deal more brightly than through those who confess his name. And again, in the passage from John that we read Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd and he says, ‘I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold and they will listen to my voice.’ And I am not suggesting that Jesus here had other faiths in mind. I think he had the Gentiles in mind, those outside the Jewish fold. But I would take that image and I would suggest that there are those in the folds of other faiths who listen to his voice, even though they may not recognise it as his.

Does that mean then that it doesn’t matter if you confess the name of Christ? Of course not. There is power in the name of Jesus. Through the name of Jesus we enter consciously into a new relationship with God. Through the name of Jesus we join that community of faith that has its roots in Israel and that was specially chosen by God. And through the name of Jesus we embark on a unique adventure of faith and we learn to discern Christ present and at work in our lives. We connect to the source of the light! And so we discover what it means to belong to the flock of the good shepherd, who laid down his life for the sheep, and we learn to

recognise his voice. And this morning we have had the joy of hearing new members confess the name of Jesus as they have joined this particular fold and we thank God for them.

‘There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.’ This is the Good Shepherd, the one and only, unique, Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep. So listen for his voice. But listen to it from wherever and from whoever it may be heard. Amen.

O holy and loving God,  
 shepherd God,  
 God of strength and God of tenderness,  
 God of the open pastures and God of the deep dark valley,  
 God who leads us by still waters  
 and whose rod and staff protect and reassure us,  
 we praise and bless your holy name.  
 We come to you for you have gathered us into one flock,  
 calling us by name and offering to guide us along right paths.

And yet, Lord, we have wandered from those paths.  
 All we like sheep have gone astray and turned each one  
 to their own way.  
 And we confess to you this morning our strayings,  
 and we acknowledge our failure and our refusal  
 to listen to the voice of our shepherd.  
 And so in sorrow we say together...

But in Jesus Christ you have come to us as the Good Shepherd  
 who has laid down his life for the sheep,  
 and who has taken it back up again,  
 and who has rescued us from our folly.  
 And so we rejoice and praise you for him,  
 thanking you for his death and resurrection.

Come amongst us here Lord here in this place and this time;  
 call us once more by name,  
 feed us at the table you have spread,  
 and send us out in your name. Amen.