

## Year B Easter 4

Acts 4: 5-12, 1 John 3:16-24, John 10: 11-18

### Finding our Voice

This morning I want to focus on our first reading – from Acts.

To refresh your memory, Peter is speaking in public and telling all who will listen that Jesus is the Messiah, and they should all repent for denying Jesus and be willing to receive him.

This seems a bit rich from someone who not so long before had denied Jesus three times himself! But isn't that just the point?

Peter is aware of his own miserable failings, and by remaining silent as Jesus went through his sham trial, Peter would have felt complicit with the powers and dominions, that is, the dominant and brutal Roman Empire, that happily killed Jesus.

Peter himself quickly realised his weakness, following the traumatic events of Good Friday. And yet, in the post-resurrection appearances, Jesus received Peter and commissioned him to be the rock upon which the followers of the way of Christ would be founded. Peter's experiences since that traumatic night led him to no longer fear death. He now had the confidence that the knowledge of God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, overcomes evil, suffering and death.

Peter had experienced such a drastic transformation that he was proclaiming in public that everyone should grow in faith and the knowledge of God, proclaiming Jesus as the Christ or Messiah. He had lost his previous fear of the empire's menace and threat.

What does this passage tell us? I think there are at least two important points; there may be more but I think you would be happy to hear no more than two from me this morning...

**Firstly**, that the vast majority of human beings tend to opt for a quiet life with minimal fuss, especially about things that don't seemingly affect them. Quite a few folk may fear to speak out about injustice, worried that they may be

singled out for persecution or even prosecution. We become complicit with events in our world when we are ignorant about what is going on – a form of denial - or afraid to speak out.

This instantly reminds me of the poem by the German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller (1892–1984).

*First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a socialist.*

*Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for  
me.*

Niemöller was put in prison in 1937 for opposing Hitler after initially supporting his anti-Communist stance. What changed his mind was when Hitler demanded the church be subservient to the State. He was confined in Sachsenhausen and Dachau. He was released in 1945 by the Allies.

Again a fairly extreme example, but his poem pointedly asks us when we might be brave enough to speak up for truth, and if it might be too late when we do.

**The second point** is that when we read this type of story we tend to side with Peter the redeemed person, but don't always honestly identify with him as he denied Jesus, or identify with the likes of Annas, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, who sought to protect their positions of privilege and power by handing Jesus over to the Empire. In fact, in our own frailty and weaknesses, we most probably would act just as Peter did when he denied Jesus. Ignorance and fear are our real enemies, but with faith and knowledge of Jesus, Peter assures us that we have all we need to become witnesses and powerful voices for the oppressed, the lost and the lonely.

Peter's behaviour is also typical of many people who deny or ignore prophetic voices but days, weeks, months or years later get behind the prophetic message and enthusiastically support it. The prophets are always pointing to how we are not following the way of God, and they make us uncomfortable and sometimes afraid to follow them too publicly. And that is because we know

what happens to prophets. But after an intervening time when society starts to realise that the prophet's words were indeed full of wisdom, we join in.

Just think of Martin Luther King Jr. Many people, including church leaders were not willing to hear and receive his message of equality and freedom for all, his dream of what the world should look like. It took his death and quite a few years before his prophetic call was supported by many influential leaders.

Peter invites us to feel confident in our faith and know what is the right thing to do, even if it feels perilous. On that basis a question we can ask ourselves is, 'When have we failed to support the truth or truth-tellers, out of fear or ignorance?

Recent examples of people speaking out against the evils of empires and powers may make us wary. Peter Navalny died for bravely speaking out against Putin's regime. Pouria Zeraati, a presenter for Iran International, a radio station in London, was stabbed on 29<sup>th</sup> March this year, most likely by men backed by the Iranian government. He survived the attack. But these are high profile and extreme examples.

One of the most contentious issues over the last six months has been the attack by Hamas on the citizens of Israel, and the Israeli response with their invasion of the Occupied Palestinian Territories in Gaza. I know I have been circumspect in what I have said, whilst being clear that both the attack by Hamas and the Israeli response are wrong and offend God. The Israeli response has been disproportionate in so many ways; in who and how many have been killed, in the destruction of homes, civil and medical infrastructure and the denial of food, water and medicines.

There are other truths I support and amplify. Some of these I can support through my words and actions, some by making donations to support causes that particularly stir me.

So, I invite you to humour me for a minute and to honestly ask yourself if you would be happy if St Peter or Jesus were to be the invited preacher here for a few weeks when I am on holiday. What uncomfortable and truly radical message might they give, and how might you respond? I am not a gifted preacher by any measure, but I suspect you may wish me back with open arms, as although I may occasionally afflict the comforted, I don't think I make you as uncomfortable as Peter and Jesus might as they pick apart our style of living and the disparities between the haves and have nots.

And finally, I ask you to consider, where is your voice? What do you care sufficiently about to make it heard, either prophetically or in support of the truth and or truth-tellers? What may help you to be as courageous as Peter, transformed through his redemption in Christ? I know I get my support from fellow members of the Iona Community, in terms of knowledge and also knowing others are willing to speak out.

So, go on, be like the transformed Peter! Speak out!