

Open Doors, Open Hearts...

July 12, 2020

By Rev Paul Graham

Read Acts 5:17-42



The story so far...

It's a good time to be a Christian. The church is enjoying its early life, with people joining the community in their droves as lives are transformed. The words of life that are being preached in the temple forecourts are being backed up by practical action. Grace and mercy abound among the faithful, with outreach programmes meeting the needs of the marginalised, the downtrodden and the isolated.

The family of God is growing but there are resources on hand to meet the demands of an increasing number of people who are relying on the community for all their needs. Even though the misguided pressure to out-do their fellows had tragic consequences, the community has been strengthened, not divided.

And God is moving. Through acts of miraculous healing, forgiveness and reconciliation, the Holy Spirit is working. Such is the power of God at work among his people that even those who fall under the shadow of the disciples are healed.

It couldn't last. Now we start to see the reaction of those in authority. One previous attempt had met with

failure. Now, though, they can no longer be complacent, content to live alongside this upstart community who preach generous grace not self-interested law, true freedom not damaging enslavement.

Acts 5:17 tells us that the motivation for the religious leaders' ire is nothing less than jealousy. "How dare these uneducated lot out-theologise us? Where are their certificates, their qualifications? How long did they spend at the feet of their Rabbi – a mere three years? Pah! Hardly out of theological nappies."

I think that it can be a helpful image if we picture the Pharisees as petulant children and to imagine first century Jerusalem as a Primary School playground. The Pharisees are the big shots in the school. They've been given special permission by the teachers (Roman overlords) to tell the younger children what they can and cannot do at playtime. Games of "Kiss Chase" and "Off Ground Tig" are organised, policed and ruled by these responsible children. There's no bad behaviour (at least not perpetrated by those under their care) and playtimes appear to run smoothly.

OK, so they also make sure that they are first in the lunch queue and occasionally one of the really small children is encouraged to part with their lunch money so a visit can be made to the local sweetshop on the way home. But the teachers either don't notice or think that's a small price to pay for the greater harmony that means that they can get an extra few minutes' peace with the staff room biscuit tin.

There had been a bit of trouble some time previously, when a new kid had arrived in the school with a certain charisma that drew a few friends to his side. The older kids had resented his popularity and did their best to make his life miserable. In the end, his dad had moved him to a different school, so that seemed to be the end of it.

But no, some of his friends had carried on where he had left off: making sure that the casualties of the playtime games were looked after and the "Billy No Mates" who hung around the railings were brought into their less violent games of marbles. In fact, marbles was fast becoming the most popular game in the playground. Nothing seemed to give them more pleasure than the tussle for a "Pearly White" or a similarly tantalising reward.

The older kids had had enough. The growing popularity of this new group was becoming problematic. Over time, there were fewer players of "Off Ground Tig" and even "Kiss Chase" was losing its appeal as the numbers dwindled. Having found that appealing to the teachers didn't get them very far, they decided to take matters into their own hands.

It started off fairly innocuously. The odd bump in the queue, a jogged elbow here and a trip there. But that was just the start of their campaign. Locking one of their rivals in the store cupboard was pretty bad, though how the child got out still remains a mystery to them. And it doesn't seem to deter them and their growing band of friends. So, they decide that they need to go further...

As we compare the Pharisees to the school bullies of our childhood, or at least the idealised image painted here, we also consider how those events echo the frighteningly real and tragically common scenario played out across the world today. Christians facing persecution is very much a problem of today, even if it seems so far removed from our own experience. Open Doors, one of our partner charities, is an advocacy and support organisation working with persecuted Christians while raising awareness of their plight in churches and government.

Across the 50 countries that comprise their annual World Watch List, North Korea is still the most dangerous place to live as a Christian, a position it has held since 2002. Governments sanction this persecution, or extremist members of other religious groups carry them out without restraint. Whether it is war-ravaged Syria and Afghanistan, or the sectarian conflicts in Nigeria and Somalia, declaring faith in Jesus Christ can be a seriously life-limiting act. Christians are imprisoned without trial, denied jobs, and even murdered because of their faith. And yet, in many of these places the Christian faith is spreading.

Just as in today's reading, there is no reduction in the number of believers in spite of the threat of economic disadvantage, imprisonment, even death.

With the current COVID-19 crisis, it has been reported that Christians have been refused medical care because of their faith or excluded when food supplies are being distributed. Meanwhile, in North Korea, which famously has no official cases of COVID-19, the crisis is manifesting itself in famine with borders closed and travelling severely limited. The church's response is to reach out. Instead of closing its doors and battenning down its hatches in a justifiable attempt to stay safe, Open Doors reports that it is the Christian community that is helping those who would usually seek to hurt them. Some of the most humbling stories I have read are of those who have opened their doors to their oppressors in their hour of need, sharing scant food allowances and giving comfort to those who are mourning lives lost to the virus.

It is as if the Good Samaritan has had a second chapter written.

The man who was attacked, now healed after his stay in the bed and breakfast thanks to the generosity of his once-hated Samaritan saviour, is out walking again on the same road to Jericho. While strolling, he sees a figure lying broken and bleeding at the side of the road. On closer inspection, he recognises the man as one of those who had previously attacked him. No longer a threat, there is the temptation to walk past on the other side or to add to his injuries with a few well-placed sandal wallops. No-one would blame him for exacting a bit of revenge, of paying back a few of the fading bruises on his own body. But no; instead, he bends down and rips up his cloak into strips to bandage the wounds. The bed and breakfast will have another wounded guest tonight...

Christians in England, those of us who have had to close our buildings for a while, may be amazed to hear that persecuted Christians are praying for us. Speaking to an Open Doors representative a few weeks ago, I was told of Indian Christians who have been praying for us. They have seen some similarities between us and them; our "secret church" existence, in homes rather than in the public square. Of course, the reasons for this are very different and we know that these times are passing, as churches are starting to reopen for worship, albeit with restrictions. But at least our restrictions are for our benefit, for our health and well-being. It's a very different story in India.

But that's also what persecution does for us; it unites us not against a common enemy, but under a common God. We can feel more connected to our sisters and brothers across the world as we work out how to live and worship under very different conditions than we are used to or would expect.

We also rise to the challenge to continue to love our neighbours. Though they may not be as violently opposed to us as the Pharisees, or the Kim family, or al-Shabaab or any of the rest of them, Christians are all called to reach out. So we reach out; with a message of hope, grace and forgiveness, and in acts of loving kindness, reflecting those who followed in the footsteps of the crucified God.

Amen.

(Photo by [Dakota Lim](#) on [Unsplash](#))