

Today we continue with our teaching on the early Church. Over the past few weeks we have heard of the rapid growth of the Church with the coming of the Holy Spirit. We have heard of the many signs and wonders done by the Apostles; how all who believed were together and had all things in common; breaking bread together and praising God; and daily the Lord added to their number. Now the atmosphere changes, the first signs of opposition appear as the Apostles continue to speak the Good News of the Gospel.

Since my ordination, I love getting into conversations where people ask me what I do. When I'm dressed in civvies the challenge is how to say what I do without it being a conversation stopper! It seems to me that there are a few jobs which can act as conversation stoppers, and it wouldn't surprise me if traffic wardens, undertakers, tax collectors and priests are in the top ten. I usually answer with a smile and say, "I'm a priest and I love my job. It's a great privilege to spend time with people, especially at some very important moments in their lives."

When asked, the Christian evangelist J John put it like this. At an airport talking to a lady who was chief executive of a clothing company, she asked him, "And what do you do?"

J John said, "Well ...I work for a global enterprise. We've got outlets in nearly every country of the world! We run orphanages; we've got hospitals, hospices; we do marriage guidance counselling. We've got schools, colleges, universities and publishing companies. We look after people from birth to death and we work in the area of behavioural alteration!" The lady said, "Wow!" J John, "I know. It's amazing isn't it?" She asked, "What's it called?" He said, "It's called Christianity!" It's important to remember that we are part of something global, we are not on our own.

In our Bible reading Peter and John found themselves in a tricky situation, having just healed a man who hadn't walked since birth. This man had been begging for money for many years. They had no money but gave the man what they had. They healed the man in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth and he immediately started to walk, jump and praise God. A crowd gathered and Peter and John started to tell them that it was not by their own power that the man could now walk. They said that the man had been healed by faith in the name of Jesus. A wonderful thing had just happened; but the crowd were joined by priests and the temple guard. When they heard that Peter and John were teaching the crowd about Jesus, they seized them and threw them into prison until the next day.

The priests must have thought, "That'll shut them up. That'll stop people listening to them!" How wrong could they be! As a result of the healing, but more importantly following on from the message about Jesus that Peter told, many who heard them believed, and the number of men grew to about 5,000. This was another dramatic day in the early life of the church as hundreds of people believed in the message of Jesus.

So Peter and John were thrown into prison and next morning were brought before the Jewish chief priests and teachers of the law who had demanded Jesus' crucifixion. They couldn't have faced a more hostile group.

However, Peter, an ordinary fisherman, inexperienced in public speaking, like many of us, spoke out boldly. The key to his boldness in speaking about Jesus was that he was filled with the Holy Spirit. In Luke 21 verse 5 Jesus said, "I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict." Jesus does this through His Spirit. Being filled with the Holy Spirit is the Christian equivalent of Popeye eating spinach. The difference is that with the Spirit there is a constant supply.

In his book "Spicing Up Your Speaking", Simon Coupland tells this story. A passenger on an aircraft is engaged in conversation by a little girl with Down's syndrome who asks, "Do you smoke?"

"No," he said, "I don't smoke." "That's good," she said, "My Mummy says you shouldn't smoke."

Then, she pointed to the businessman who was sitting next to him and said, "Does he smoke?" Naturally he was a little embarrassed, but he thought he ought to humour her, so he asked the businessman, "Excuse me, but do you smoke?" "No," he said. "That's good," said the girl. A few minutes later the girl asked, "Do you love Jesus?" "Yes," the man replied, "As a matter of fact I do love Jesus!" "That's good," she said. "Everyone should love Jesus."

Suddenly our hero realised what the girl was going to say next. "That man next to you," she said, "Does he love Jesus?" So he swallowed hard, turned to the businessman and asked him; and with a tear in his eye the man replied, "Do you know, I've wanted someone to ask me that for a long time." And the man led that businessman to Christ.

What will you say when people ask you, "How did you spend your weekend? What did you do yesterday?" American church leader Jerry Shirley says that

Jesus challenges us to be fishers of men, but we seem content to be keepers of the aquarium...we might be bold to talk about Jesus in church, but not out there!

This week and every week we must be ready. That person on the train, in the shopping queue, sitting at the desk opposite you, the person alone at the school gate; even those outwardly confident people; they all need to know about Jesus. We too can be bold in speaking about our faith in Jesus by being open to God's Holy Spirit working and speaking through us.

Let us pray; Father God we pray that this week and every week you will empower us by your Holy Spirit to share the Good News of the gospel with all those whom we meet so that they too may experience the joy of knowing Jesus as their Saviour. In Jesus' name, Amen.