

About 2,000 years since Jesus walked out of a tomb alive, we come to the Sunday following Easter, which is a decidedly quieter Sunday, you may notice, than last Sunday was. Fewer people show up in church. Some of the extra bells and whistles, the flowers and pageantry, present on Easter Sunday morning are gone and most churches return to a fairly normal routine on what is an ordinary Sunday. That’s OK. People will still come to church. All over the world and two millennia later people will still come. They will sing. They will pray. Someone like me stands up to clear his throat to share a sermon on a Scripture passage like the one we have read today.

It’s been happening like this in the church for centuries. “If this thing is of God” Gamaliel predicted, “there will be no stopping it.” Well, here we are in the year of our Lord 2022. And Gamaliel had it right. So, who is this Gamaliel fellow, you may ask?

Gamaliel was a Pharisee. He was also “*honored by all the people,*” according to Luke’s account of the apostles’ appearance before the Sanhedrin in Acts chapter 5. Because this key leader of the Sanhedrin says something that is utterly sensible and miraculously foreknowing, we ought to pay close attention to his speech. Once Peter makes it clear that they cannot be frightened into silence by the likes of the Sanhedrin, Gamaliel looks into the eyes of his colleagues and sees the fires of anger and vengeance beginning to flare up. They are ready to lock Peter and company into irons or do far worse to them than just that. So, Gamaliel steps into the middle of the conflict.

I hear him saying, “Look, my friends, let’s be both sensible and cautious here. These Messiah wannabes are a dime a dozen. I’ll just mention Theudas and Judas the Galilean, but you know full well we could multiply that list ten-fold in no time. It runs like this practically every time: An impressive preacher rises to prominence, scores and then hundreds or thousands of people desperate for a little meaning in their lives hitch their wagons to his rising star. The rising

star eventually gets extinguished by the Romans or someone else and legions of followers fall away. They go back home. They start their search for Mr. Wonderful all over again. Believe me, gentlemen, we'll never hear the name of Theudas again. You see, if all there is to this Jesus movement is a dead itinerant rabbi, and now these pathetic rag-tag followers who are trying to resuscitate the dying corpse of their master with a cockamamie story of resurrection, well, no worries. Soon enough it will all go the way of Theudas and company. And if not, well, there's about a 1.7% probability that this thing is of God. If that is so, we cannot stop it no matter what we do. Trust me friends: sitting back and letting this thing play itself out is our best option."

Well, Gamaliel had a point...or two. Plus, it was getting late in the day and Happy Hour wasn't far away. And since a trial and sentencing would chew up a lot of time, the Sanhedrin just let Peter and John go with a beating and yet another generic plea to STOP talking about this Jesus. The apostles then left the Sanhedrin REJOICING, "*because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name [of Jesus]*" (v. 41). But they were given notice. It was *not* because they "beat the rap" but because getting roughed up by the authorities was *exactly* what Jesus told them to expect would happen if they were indeed faithful to the Gospel and its proclamation.

The Sanhedrin had no real power over these men. There is a moment in the gritty film *The Dark Knight* when The Joker, a sociopathic criminal and adversary of Batman is being flung around and beaten by the desperate superhero who needs The Joker to give him some information. But The Joker doesn't fear death. He holds all the good cards, and so the brute force through which someone like Batman can usually get his way and win his victories is meaningless in this encounter. "You have nothing, nothing to threaten me with, nothing you can do to me with all your strength," says the villain. Exactly because this is true, it about drives Batman over the edge. People who live by brute force, who live by the sword, generally go crazy when it turns out none of that power can make a dent in someone's attitude or behavior.

Of course, the apostles in Acts 5 are the opposite of a sick sadist like The Joker (I hope I needn't point that out). But in a real way their message to the Sanhedrin is the same: "You have no power over us, nothing to threaten us with!" They know the truth and among the truths they know is that Jesus promised a level of persecution and opposition on a par to what he himself experienced. The apostles know something else too: Because in his resurrection Jesus won the victory over the worst thing this world can dole out—death itself—even the specter of death is not quite enough to undo them in front of these powerful religious authorities.

The core of the Truth that Peter and the other apostles are called to proclaim means that they cannot stop talking about it just because some people don't want to hear it. And besides that, there is no threat so fiery that would not in one sense confirm the Truth of their message, because their own Master had predicted just such opposition. In addition, any threat will only cause them to cling even more tightly to the Truth that Jesus' love is stronger than death.

That boxes the authorities in rather neatly, you see, and drives them crazy for a long time to come, even down to this present day. Even today many in our highly secular society try to treat religion like a hobby, something that should stay private and sequestered on a par with building model airplanes in your basement or collecting stamps or painting watercolors. Why would any such thing have to accompany a person to work, to Congress, to the mall, or to anywhere else? What the authorities fail to see again and again is that the nature of the Truth embodied in the Gospel is by necessity as broad and as all-encompassing as one can imagine. It's a matter of life and death to those who believe it because somewhere at the heart of the whole message are convictions that are inherently related to, well, life and death!

Gamaliel ended up being right on two counts: A fake movement would die out (and the death of this group's leader had thus far caused the opposite to happen, which is weird to say the least). Also, if God were really behind this, they could no more stop it any more than they could repeal the Law of Gravity.

According to an old adage, it takes a thief to catch a thief. But sometimes it also takes a thief to identify those who are, as a matter of fact, NOT thieves. Such was the case some years ago when the convicted Watergate co-conspirator, Charles Colson, wrote that it was precisely his experience as a man involved in a fraud and a cover-up that convinced him of the truth of the New Testament and, particularly, its witness to the resurrection. Colson was part of the Nixon administration and learned one of the most painful lessons in politics the hard way, namely, that crimes and mistakes in government are bad enough but 99 times out of 100, the attempt to cover it up creates far more problems.

What was particularly interesting to Colson was another thing he learned along the way that eventually landed him in prison: People involved in a lie, a fraud, or a cover-up will only suffer so much before they crack and tell the truth. Very few people are willing to suffer for very long in defense of a lie. Very few people can stand to see their family members suffer in defense of a lie. And very, very few people are willing to die for what they know is a lie.

Roughly 2,000 years since Jesus walked out of a tomb alive, we are here on the Sunday after Easter, a decidedly quieter Sunday than the Sunday before. That's OK. People still come to church. They sing. They pray. Someone like me stands up, clears his throat, and shares a sermon on a Scripture passage like the one we have read today from Acts chapter 5.

I don't have to remind any of you that in 2022 we live in an era of "fake news." To be honest, I think fake news has been around a very long time. I think we used to give it the name "*propaganda*." But we still ask: Who do we believe? Who should we turn to for the truth? How do we know what is true and what is false? When Peter and the apostles appeared before the Sanhedrin, a respected Pharisee named Gamaliel suggested they might be spreading "fake news." "*But,*" he also said, "*if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God*" (v.39). If this thing is of God, Gamaliel predicted, there will be no stopping it. And Praise be to God, Gamaliel had it right! Amen.