

# Second Sunday of Easter, New Testament, Year C

AS ONE WITH AUTHORITY

Acts 5:27-32

Second Sunday of Easter

Analysis by Bruce K Modahl

27When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, 28saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." 29But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. 30The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. 31God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

DIAGNOSIS: Picking a Fight

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Who Do You Think You Are?

In the space of a few verses in the Acts of the Apostles the temple police came first for Peter and John and then for all the apostles. The apostles taught the people about Jesus and healed the sick among them. This took place in Solomon's portico where just anyone could come. Not just anyone was allowed into the temple itself. The apostles gathered a large following which alarmed those in charge. The police brought them before the authorities, the same authorities to which they first brought Jesus. The authorities asked them in so many words, "Who do you think you are? We, not you, are the ones to whom God has given

authority to teach and to take action for the people. We do not teach in Jesus' name but in the Name which is above all others. We take action for the people not in Jesus' name but in that same sacred Name."

#### Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Recognizance Gone Wrong

They failed to recognize who the apostles are because they failed to recognize who Jesus is. They mounted plenty of reconnaissance missions but they all had the one purpose of protecting their authority and their own skins. It seems their main concern is that the apostles' preaching will bring "this man's (Jesus') blood on us." To maintain their status they could not risk stirring up the people which in turn would stir up the Romans, upon whose authority theirs rested. They failed to recognize the one, who incarnate, bears the Name which is above all others.

#### Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Fighting Against God

We are not stepping on any preacher's toes by reading farther into Chapter 5 or back to Chapters 3 and 4, since these texts do not appear in the lectionary for the Sundays of Easter. They provide important context for the few verses before us. And it would be appropriate for the preacher to summarize the account from Chapter 3 to the end of Chapter 5 since it is Peter in Chapter 3 and Gamaliel in Chapter 5 who nail the final diagnosis. Gamaliel, a Pharisee in the council, advised his fellow authorities to back off. He counseled, "I tell you keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" For Peter there is no "may" in his witness. He says, "You killed the author[ity] of life." This is not a cheap play on words. The extended meaning is in the Greek word. It is used for Jesus in Chapters 3 and 5

of Acts. The first meaning listed in the lexicon is “leader, ruler, prince.” The second meaning is “one who begins something.” The third meaning the lectionary cites is “originator, founder.” To fight with God or to kill the author(ity) of life is a fool’s errand. It is a suicide mission with ramifications for all that live. No wonder darkness covered the earth when Jesus died.

#### PROGNOSIS: Light and Life to All He Brings

##### Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Light Overcomes the Darkness

Peter and the apostles answered the authorities saying, “The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader (here is that author[ity] word) and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.”

In all other narratives with which I am familiar, when the vanquished hero makes a comeback she or he takes revenge by putting their tormentors in the grave. The enemy Jesus vanquishes is death. He offers repentance, a turning to him as the Authority, and forgiveness of sins. Somewhere in the machinery at work in the underpinnings of creation, Jesus’ death and resurrection engage a gear that turns the cosmos to let in the light of a new creation, which for the present overlaps the old order, but which, when Christ comes again, will overwhelm the old order whose boundary line is the darkness of the grave.

##### Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Recognizance Gone Right

The apostles and many to whom they preached recognized Jesus as the Authority, the Incarnate One who bears God’s own Name. They recognized him as such not because he had stars pinned to his collar but by the wounds on his hands, head, feet, and side.

They recognized him as the one who conquered sin and death. They feared, loved, and trusted him above everyone and everything else.

#### Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): We Know Who We Are and Show It

We are God's own daughters and sons, adopted into the family at baptism and fed from the family dinner table in the Lord's Supper. By our baptism God calls us and authorizes us to keep doing what the apostles were doing. We are latter-day apostles. Knowing who we are frees us from the need to cling to our own privilege and power. We rather get to follow the first apostles, speaking the gospel to those gathered in places where just anyone can come. We may not be dragged before councils and governors to account for our faith. However, many are. We offer our prayers, aid, words of encouragement, and thanks to God for their bold witness. We do come in contact with those who are contemptuous of our faith. May we boldly and gently give witness. In Solomon's Portico the sick were eager for their friends to position them so that Peter's shadow might fall upon them as he passed by. There are many who are eager to have our shadows fall upon them as we visit them in hospital rooms, rehab centers, and the homes to which they are confined. As Peter said, "We are witnesses to all these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." We get to obey God because the gospel does what the law cannot do. The Holy Spirit calls us by the gospel, which creates hearts that are obedient to God.