

## **Growing in our Willingness to Give Testimony**

### **Mark 14:53-72**

Two weeks ago I spoke a bit about phobias.

Let me tell you about one of my own unusual fears.

On the rare occasions that I have gone to a show or a concert  
I've noticed that in the show there is a moment  
when the performer engages in some audience participation.  
The spotlight will flash back and forth on the audience  
before stopping on one unsuspecting individual  
who will be called up on to the stage to participate in the performance.  
Once Jas and I bought tickets to see a comedian  
and we had a serious discussion about how close to sit to the front  
lest the comedian point us out and incorporate us into his act.  
We managed to escape involvement,  
but there was one couple who arrived late to the show  
and so the comedian stopped the performance  
while we all watched the two of them find their seats.  
It was a bit mean actually.

I have no idea why people think this adds anything to the routine.

Perhaps it's because the organizers are people  
who don't mind being the spotlight themselves  
and they want to share the joy,

But the last thing I want to do  
is to get up on the stage  
with no idea about what I'm going to be asked to say or do.  
The idea makes me feel uncomfortable,  
and so the situation is one I want to avoid.

I wonder whether there is a spiritual equivalent to this fear.

I wonder whether the idea of having the spotlight land upon *our faith*  
might be something that makes us feel sick.

In the same way that we might attend a show while thinking

"Please don't ask me to get up on stage,

*Please* don't ask me to get up on stage!"

perhaps we arrive at work,

perhaps we arrive at a friend's BBQ or dinner party

with a similar internal mantra:

"Please don't let religion come up,

please don't ask me about what I do on Sundays!"

Situations like that can make us feel very uncomfortable!

We don't know how the conversation is going to go,

and so the topic might be one we deflect or try to avoid.

We have reached the end of our series entitled *Growing more like Jesus*,  
a series where we have asked the question,  
“if we want to become more like Jesus, then what is that going to look like?  
What was Jesus like? What will it mean to imitate him?”  
And sometimes the example Jesus leaves for us is a challenging one,  
and for many people today’s aspect is particularly difficult.

Jesus was willing to give testimony;  
to bear witness about his true identity,  
about the reality of who God is and about what God’s plans are for the world.  
When Jesus was asked about these issues, he was ready to give an answer.  
And if we have resolved to grow more like him,  
then we should be willing to grow in this willingness as well.

But it’s not easy, is it?  
We’ll see that it wasn’t easy for Jesus or for Peter his close friend,  
but I hope as we consider their experience  
we might be strengthened in our resolve  
to be willing witnesses as to who Christ is.

Our passage is taken from the trial of Jesus, the evening before his execution,  
And Mark makes it clear that Jesus is subject to some unfair accusations.  
Chapter 14:55 The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence  
against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. <sup>56</sup> Many testified  
falsely against him, but their statements did not agree.

What was true of Jesus then is also true of Jesus now;  
he has always been a figure of whom people make false claims!

One of the more ridiculous claims made in recent years  
is the suggestion that perhaps Jesus never really existed.  
Richard Dawkins gives air to this view in his book *The God Delusion*,  
he doesn’t buy it completely himself, but he isn’t shy in throwing it out there  
as a way of sowing seeds of doubt into people’s minds.

But it doesn’t take much to expose the theory as one that is lacking credibility.  
It’s a theory originally put forward by a professor of German language,  
and not by any recognised historian or theologian.  
In fact, one of my colleagues, John Dickson who is the minister at Roseville,  
he has issued a challenge that if anyone can find a qualified historian or  
theologian who also holds this view, then he will eat a page of his Bible!  
My understanding is that his Bible is still in tact.  
It’s a rampant piece of false testimony – this idea that Jesus never existed.

But the most damaging pieces of false testimony  
are those that contain some reflection of the truth.

We have an example from verse 57 Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: <sup>58</sup>“We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.’ ” <sup>59</sup> Yet even then their testimony did not agree.

When we hear these words we can find ourselves scratching our heads  
and wondering “Hang, on Jesus *did* say that, didn’t he?”  
Well, he did say speak about the temple being destroyed,  
and he did speak about another type of temple being rased,  
but not in the way described here.

In John 2 Jesus challenges *his opponents* inviting *them* to destroy the temple  
after which he would raise a replacement.  
John makes it clear that Jesus was referring to a metaphorical temple,  
his own body, the place in which God dwells.

In Mark ch 13, Jesus simply predicts  
that the physical temple would be destroyed at some point,  
and says nothing about a replacement.

So what we have in verse 58 is a the type of false testimony  
where words said by Jesus are twisted and misrepresented.  
And again, what was true about Jesus then is true about Jesus today.

“Jesus tells us that God loves us and that we should love each other,  
therefore Jesus would not want me to be restricted in any way.  
I feel that would be unloving, and God is about love.”

Well God is about love, about his *Fatherly* love for us,  
and ask any parent about whether love means setting no boundaries,  
and you’ll soon realize that parental love never means ‘no restrictions’,  
in fact, love will mean that boundaries *are* put in place.

But you see how the deception works?  
Take a grain of truth,  
and give it a twist so that it says something very different.  
It’s the type of lie that the Devil himself revels in.  
What did he say to Eve in the Garden?  
“Did God really say ‘you cannot eat from any tree in the garden?’”  
No, God said Eve couldn’t eat from the tree in the *middle* of the garden.

So we live in a world where false testimonies about Christ fly thick and fast.  
This means that whenever we are asked about what we think,  
it’s an opportunity to clarify some of the mistruths that are being spoken.

In a world of lies, our words of testimony become an important voice.  
Perhaps our sense of fear can be replaced by a sense of opportunity.

But sometimes the world hates to listen to the truth, and there is a cost to speaking.  
After the false testimonies are aired, Jesus is asked about what he's heard.  
We're told Jesus remains silent, but it's not exactly clear why.  
Maybe he felt it was obvious enough that the accusations were lies,  
or was he waiting to testify about something he felt was more important?

That opportunity comes with the direct question that's put to him in v 61

"Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

When a direct question is asked about the identity of Christ,  
then of all the opportunities to speak up this is one that must be taken.  
Is Jesus the one that God had appointed to bring salvation?

And so Jesus takes this as the signal for him to bear testimony

"I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Jesus says "Yes, I am God's specially anointed, and you will see me in my glory". He evokes the imagery of Daniel ch 7 which speaks of God's messiah as one whom all nations will worship, one whose kingdom will never be destroyed.

So what is the reaction to this true word of testimony?

Verse 63 The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked.  
<sup>64</sup> "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death. <sup>65</sup> Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!" And the guards took him and beat him.

This is where a word of truth will sometimes lead you.

Since moving up here to the upper north shore

we're getting used to living with possums on the roof and in the yard.  
Harvey the dog likes to get out there and he tries to scare them off,  
but all the possums do with him is sit on the fence and stare.  
One thing I can do though, is turn the outside lights on, then they scatter.

There are some people who don't take too well to the light of truth.

In John's Gospel we are told that in Jesus light has come into the world,  
but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

So sometimes people will not want to hear this testimony

And while some will run away from the light like a possum in the yard,  
others will try and smash the light so that no-one can receive it.

This is what happened to Jesus,

it what's been happening to our Christian brothers and sisters in places like  
Syria, Iraq and Egypt.

to a lesser extent it's what's happening when groups within our own society  
try and shut down Christian ministry,

when you hear of protests and petitions  
aimed against Scripture classes in schools, for instance.

Throughout the Bible Jesus makes it clear  
that sometimes our testimony will be seen as offensive,  
but he sets the example—doesn't he—of speaking up *despite the cost*.

I think sometimes the problem is not that we are surprised at the cost,  
rather it's that we perceive the cost all too clearly.  
In contrast to Jesus, we have from v66  
the well-known story of Peter's failure testify.

It really is a heartbreaking performance.  
Have you seen the movie the Kings Speech?  
It opens with the future King George VI attempting to give a public address  
but his stammer is terrible  
and people start to look away because they feel so bad for him.

Peter's performance leaves here me with a similar feeling.  
You feel sorry for him, and it's easy to empathize with him  
because none of us are perfect,  
but we also know that what he produces here really isn't good enough.

"You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," a servant Girl says to him in v 67.

<sup>68</sup> But he denied it and moved away to stand somewhere else.

But the servant girl saw him move and said again to those standing around,

"This fellow is one of them." <sup>70</sup> Again he denied it.

And then the others started chiming in

"Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." Galileans had a distinct accent,  
so Jesus and his friends would have stood out in Jerusalem.

<sup>71</sup> [Peter] began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." <sup>72</sup> Immediately the rooster crowd the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.

It's this last line that I find most unsettling.

When we fail to testify,  
the tragedy isn't simply that we allow lies to go unchallenged,  
the tragedy isn't simply that we give in to cowardice,  
the bigger tragedy is that we are betraying our friend.  
That's what Peter realizes with horror as the rooster crows.

Jesus was Peter's savior, he was Peter's Lord, he was also Peter's friend.  
And what was true for Peter is also true for us.  
Jesus says that he knows his sheep by name,  
and that in the age to come he will give each of us a new name,

one known only between you and him.  
Jesus knows us, he's concerned about us, he died for each of us,  
and yet we can so easily deny that we know him, or that we take him seriously.  
And that's the great tragedy of failing to testify.  
Please, let's aim to be better friends than Peter.

But it's not easy, is it? As Peter knew all too well, the real Jesus is a divisive figure, and if we associate ourselves with him then there might be trouble. So we need to think a little bit practically about how to remain loyal.

I've got a couple of headings there, all beginning with 'P', this doesn't exhaust all the practical things we could say, but maybe it will get us started.

First of all *pray*. Pray for opportunities to testify; God will answer those prayers.  
(Perhaps that's why we don't pray in this way.  
Might need to start with a prayer of repentance  
for our disinterest in this matter).  
Pray for the right words to come.  
Remember Christ's promise to his disciples –  
the Holy Spirit will give us the words to say.

But the Holy Spirit may want us to *practice*.  
We are not robots programmed by God and set in motion,  
God works *with us* as we both work together to grow into Christ's image;  
to form us into effective witnesses.  
This is a skill that needs to be rehearsed,  
the first few times might not be very impressive but you need to persevere.

And so you need to *prepare*. If people do ask you a pointed question, do you have a line that you know you can use?

It's a bit like learning a foreign language when travelling.

When Jas and I went to France I had my line worked out for buying the metro ticket at the ticket window to get from the airport to our accommodation. Got to the train station and of course they were all automated booths, with an English option! But, do you know what you might say? Of course, we all know that it ought not to be like a forging language, we should know our faith fairly well. *Why are you a Christian? Do you really believe in prayer? Isn't what you believe the same as all the other religions?* Are you prepared for those questions? Have a think about an answer and spend some time rehearsing!

*Patience* is called for: patience with ourselves in our bumbling first attempts, patience with others as they start the long process towards understanding. The gospel is very confronting, and so we will encounter initial defensiveness. I think sometimes we are once bitten twice shy, we get one negative response and so we bury our willingness to testify,

but we must persevere in our willingness to speak the truth

Finally, we need to *process*.

Process how well we are testifying, don't be satisfied with failure –

For Christ's sake, we must seek God's help in improving.

And process with each other,

we will be better witnesses if we find encouragement from one another.

When we know we are loved here,

then we'll have a better change of taking a risk out there.

And the world needs us to take that risk when the opportunity arises.

The world needs us to imitate Jesus in our willingness to testify.

Pray.