

# What we have seen and heard

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*Homily on Acts 4:13-21 – Saturday of the Octave of Easter*

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I want to start this reflection this morning with a quotation from Ronald Beers.

Not often will sharing the gospel send us to prison as it did Peter and John. Still, we run risks in trying to win others to Christ. We might be willing to face a night in prison if it would bring 5,000 people to Christ, but shouldn't we also be willing to suffer for even one? What do you risk in witnessing – rejection, persecution? Whatever the risks, realize that nothing done for God is ever wasted.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, I want to lay this idea alongside another one from a contemporary convert.

When the Lord calls someone to obedience out of a life of sin, that's going to hurt a lot of people. It just is. A lot of people were hurt by my obedience. I'm grateful that when I had this stirring I was not in a church that minimized it. I never heard anybody say, "God has a perfect plan for your life." No, they said, ". . . count the costs, this is going to be brutal, this is going to be bloody." When I said "Look at all these hurting people," nobody said, "Serves them right, boy, are

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Beers, "Note on Acts 4:3" in *Life Application Bible*, ed. Ronald Beers (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishing, 1990), 1893.

they a bunch of sinners.” Instead, people in church rolled up their sleeves and said, “OK, how can we help? How can we get to know your friends?”<sup>2</sup>

Conversion is a messy business. From both sides, proclamation and reception, a lot is at stake. Conversion is a costly business. Both of these quotations speak of that. In my own experience of international work, I have found that neat and clean universalized solutions are simply not about the real world. I think of the people I know in Ukraine, which is much in the news today. During the Soviet period a Christian had a choice. He or she could join the state-recognized (and therefore controlled) Orthodox church, and have a limited religious life in public or one could join the illegal, underground Catholic Church, and risk prison and exile. It seems like a simple, though painful choice. But was it? Many clergy recognizing that their parishioners did not have sufficient faith to move into the underground. Like a captain who does not abandon his ship until all of the crew and passengers are safe, these clergy remained in the state-controlled churches so that they could provide pastoral care for the weaker members. They reasoned that some religion was better than no religion and that as leaders, they could not abandon the weakest among them. To the clergy in the underground, such ideas were treason and apostasy. This is a sad example of how conversion hurts people. Both the decision to enter the state church or the underground church could potentially be a moral choice. But if those in the state church failed to walk a very thin line to avoid collaboration, their integrity would be compromised. By the same token, if those in the

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<sup>2</sup> Marvin Olasky, “Journey to Grace” in *World Magazine* “Money matcher,” March 23, 2013. [http://www.worldmag.com/2013/03/journey\\_of\\_grace/page1](http://www.worldmag.com/2013/03/journey_of_grace/page1) Accessed April 25, 2014.

underground church adopted a self-righteous attitude, their integrity would be compromised. Neither a pragmatic path nor a heroic path of themselves is the Christian path.

Conversion is a difficult business. As Peter and John say in the reading, we must proclaim what we have seen and heard. But, *how* we do that may differ in because of circumstances. We are not called to be successful. We are not called to be heroes. We are only called to be faithful disciples. We are called to be faithful to proclamation, but with great freedom as to how that proclamation is made. We should be guided always by the good our proclamation will do.

The Lord Jesus told the Eleven “Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature.”<sup>3</sup> He also rebuked them for their unbelief at not accepting the testimony that he was risen. As ministers, we must be faithful in proclamation. If we are ever ordered not to do so, we will have to respond with Peter and John, and reply with the question “Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to obey you rather than God, you be the judges. It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard.”

But we need to make our witness so that our hearers are free to be those judges. We have to use skillful means so that their minds are able to receive what we proclaim. My point in all of this is that we have to speak to the audience in front of us. The greatest risk in witnessing is not the danger to ourselves, but that we will waste the opportunity. When someone gives you their attention you have a moment, and often

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 16:15

only a moment, to reach them with the truth. The Apostles offer us the best example, they tell of what they have seen and heard. We proclaim a person, Jesus, before we proclaim an idea.

Proclaiming an idea can hurt someone profoundly. We see this with polarizing political speech all the time. That's not preaching. Proclaiming the gospel always leads to an invitation to relationship. And not a disembodied relationship with the idea of Jesus, but a relationship with the real Jesus, who is really present among us in his body which is composed of the baptized faithful.

The test of effective proclamation, I would submit to you, is not found in the division conversion creates, but in whether in that division there is concern for those on the other side of the divide. Do the baptized faithful feel the pain of the people left behind by that conversion? Relationship should both precede and follow proclamation.

Conversions are hard and messy and there is no formula I can teach you as to how to do them well. But at root, we proclaim a person, Jesus, whom we have experienced. That, first of all, is what we need to share. And we need to do that in the context of actual relationships. Remember what Cardinal George says, and which Linda likes to repeat over and over again. If you get the relationships right, everything else will follow.