

## ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

### Acts 4

Our subject this morning is environmental studies. It's not going to be a lecture on ecology or a promotion for the Green Party. We're continuing to look at the life of the early Christians in the book of Acts and in chapter 4 we see them living in not just one but three environments.

#### 1. The world

I was thinking of calling this talk 'Living In The Real World'. But what is the real world? On the BBC's *Songs of Praise* last Sunday Aled Jones visited two monasteries. One was Glenstal Abbey near Limerick, a Benedictine community situated in a beautiful rural setting with open spaces of woodland nearby, a place where you would imagine it would not be hard to be a monk. The other was an Augustinian community in the heart of London, with shops and cinemas and all the temptations of life in the capital city right on the doorstep. For them their environment forced the question: what is the real world?

We've seen in earlier weeks that the coming of the Holy Spirit did not isolate the first Christians from the world. It thrust them out to face the realities of that world: its needs, its sufferings, its opinions.

In the New Testament the expression 'the world' is used in two ways. It is used of the people who live in the world, people of every race, colour and creed. In his Gospel John reminds us that 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him' (John 3:16, 17).

The world is people and God loves the world. That's the first meaning. So when John writes in his first letter, 'Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him' (1 John 2:15), it's obvious that 'the world' has a different meaning there. It means the world as a system of beliefs and behaviour that eliminates God at best and opposes God at worst. It's a system that thrives on lust, greed and pride.

Jesus told the disciples, 'If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you' (John 15:18, 19).

There's a paradox here. The world was created by God but sin spoiled the world. There has been a rebellion and Satan has taken over the world. Here's John's first letter again. 'We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one' (1 John 5:19). What a paradox: God's world – controlled by the evil one. That was the world the early Christians were living in and it's the world we're living in.

We've got to love the world and yet not love the world; we've got to be caring and yet careful. We've got to be alive to both the truth of God and the lies of the devil.

Back to Acts chapter 4. Verses 1 to 3: 'The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day.'

There was opposition and it was to lead to full-scale persecution, and it came from the priests. The temple guard were the police force controlled by the priests and the Sadducees were a religious group consisting of aristocratic priests. Whereas the main

focus of the Pharisees and Scribes was the Law, the main focus of the priests and the Sadducees was the temple.

The Sadducees rejected the idea of resurrection and future rewards, angels and demons. Their religion was a formality centred on temple observances. In reality they were more interested in political power than anything else.

What was their response to Peter and John? 'They seized Peter and John and ... put them in jail.'

Think for a moment about the irony of this situation. Here's a man who has been a cripple from birth, who ekes out a miserable living by begging outside the temple. Suddenly in the name of Jesus he's completely healed. He's walking and jumping and praising God. How would you expect the religious leaders to react to that? You would expect them to be pleased but instead they were angry, angry enough to arrest and imprison the very people who had brought about his healing.

The next day they put them on trial. Verses 5 to 7: 'The rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"'

I only once heard Martin Lloyd Jones preach and it was on this text. He pointed out what an unlikely alliance this was. The priests and the teachers of the law were normally at daggers drawn. They had precious little in common but here they buried their differences and united against the common danger of a name that could bring healing and new life to needy people.

That's the world. The evil that is in the hearts of worldly people is not just to be found in prison cells and dens of iniquity. It's to be found in temples and churches, in those who have a form of godliness but whose hearts are not right. The best as well as the worst of God's creation have been corrupted by sin.

In this intimidating environment Peter and John were not intimidated. They spoke out boldly for the truth of the gospel.

It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.

Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.

The second environment in which those Christians were living was

## **2. Heaven**

Verses 23 to 24: 'On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.'

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians he addressed them as God's people 'in Ephesus in Christ'. When he wrote to the Philippians he addressed them as God's people 'in Christ Jesus in Philippi'. When he wrote to the Colossians he addressed them as those who were 'in Colosse in Christ'.

They were in the world but they had another environment; they were in Christ. In the letter to the Ephesians Paul goes on to say, 'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.'

Where is Christ? He is ascended. He is in heaven. He is exalted to the right hand of God's majesty on high. So if we are in Christ where are we? In heaven. We have a dual citizenship. We are citizens of earth but also citizens of heaven. In Philippians 3 verse 20 Paul says, 'Our citizenship is in heaven'. In Colossians 3 verses 1 to 3 Paul says, 'Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.'

As citizens of heaven we have access to God in heaven now by prayer. Ephesians 2 verse 18: 'through him [Jesus] we ... have access to the Father by one Spirit.'

In Acts 4 verses 24 to 30 we find the early Christians taking advantage of that access to heaven in prayer. Briefly, we can see five themes in their prayer.

1. *Creation.* 'Sovereign Lord,' they said, 'you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.' God the creator is sovereign. He is Lord.
2. *Revelation.* 'You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One."' They were familiar with the scriptures and they took comfort from them. Nothing that had happened was taking God by surprise.
3. *Opposition.* 'Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.' The opposition they faced was simply a continuation of the opposition to Jesus himself. It has been predicted in scripture and experienced by Jesus.
4. *Predestination.* 'They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.' God had not lost control. He was still the Sovereign Lord.
5. *Petition.* 'Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.'

As those who are in Christ, as citizens of heaven, as those who breathe the air of a higher environment, we can bring all our petitions and prayers to God in the name of Jesus. The law of gravity which keeps our feet on solid earth has no power over our souls. We have full access to God.

'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4:6, 7).

Summing up their prayer, it was a combination of the big picture and the little picture. The little picture wasn't that small but in the light of the big picture – God's sovereignty and power – there was nothing to fear. The result of their praying is in verse 31: 'After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.'

### **3. The church**

The third environment was the church. The church is on earth and in heaven. It shares both those environments. We have escaped from the world and yet we are still in the world. We are citizens of heaven and yet we are not yet bodily in heaven. What did it mean to those early Christians to belong to the church?

Verses 32 to 35: 'All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For

from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.'

What we see here is a combination of practical care and evangelistic activity. At times the church has put these two things in opposition to each other but they belong together: care for the whole person, body and soul, for time and eternity.

Now here's the challenge. What kind of environment is our church? Is it a place where there is unity, everyone in one heart and one mind? Is it a place where there is unselfishness, more of a care for people than for things? Is it a place where there is power, a continual testimony to the resurrection of our Lord Jesus? Is it a place where no one is needy, because we share what we have and look out for each other?

Of course that environment was to be tested. Barnabas was a great example of the very best in the church. Ananias and Sapphira were an example of how that beautiful environment could be corrupted by selfishness and lies. Who are we more like? Who am I more like? Barnabas or Ananias and Sapphira?