

As I said last Sunday, Easter announces the birth of Christian Church. The modern liturgical revisers got it right. From this Sunday to Whitsunday, instead of having OT reading in the lectionary, it is being replaced by the Book of Acts of Apostles. As soon as Jesus rose from the dead, the church had to be seen in active mode. Its active mode consists of internal and external events. This morning let us see how the church begins with its internal events and its subsequent effect on external, outreach activities.

Some of you might have noticed a rather strange occurrence last Sunday if you watched TV. Pope Francis was by himself in the St. Peter's Basilica at Rome, delivering Easter message to an empty church. I was no different to the Pope. I also preached to an empty church as well. Some people would say Pope Francis has the Apostolic succession on his side whereas you are just an ordinary priest in a church. He is indispensable and you are nobody. But why are we doing the same thing on Easter Day?

I believe Anglican Church does accept the idea of apostolic succession but does not agree with the view of the Roman Catholic. In other words we do not agree with RC's teaching that apostolic succession is best seen in the succession of Popes ever since St. Peter became the first bishop of Rome. That is a strained reading of Jesus' words to Peter in Matthew 16.18-19. True apostolic succession is to be found in Acts 2.42: *'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching'*. In other words, the church never ceases to be living in this kind of mode. Of course, v.42 goes on to say the mode consists of another three aspects: fellowship, breaking of bread and the prayers. But without teaching of the apostles, none of the other three activities can constitute what a church is.

Ever since the day of Resurrection and Pentecost the church must always devote itself to the apostles' teaching. Otherwise it cannot be called church. Out of this devotion to the teaching of apostles, verses

43-47 depict, one may say, a rather, idealistic picture of success. But the book of Acts does not end on this point, the success of early church has to be seen in how this teaching of the apostles develops subsequently.

As the story of Acts unfolds, the teaching of the apostles has to be seen in the context of their witness to the outside world. When Peter and John stood in the midst of Sanhedrin, they said, '*we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.*' (Acts 4.20) This sums up the total teaching of apostles. One even may venture to say, Peter could have said it many times in different situations, that is, to both believing and unbelieving communities.

Christian teaching therefore, in the first place, is not something one can theorize one's belief. Peter said, '*we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.*' In other words, he voices out his personal experience. Furthermore, Peter did not do it casually or occasionally. He did it in season as well as out of season. Although the teaching of apostles is personal experience, the emphasis is rather on what have been seen and heard.

What have Peter and John seen and heard? Is it not the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Jesus Christ therefore determines the content of apostles' teaching. Their teaching is also a witness. They witness the death and resurrection of Jesus and what effect they had on them. How it changed their lives once for all. How they could now fearlessly stand in the midst of Sanhedrin and boldly proclaimed Jesus had risen from the dead.

The RC whenever they talk about apostolic succession, their main concern is authority of the pope. But in the teaching of apostles, the main emphasis is rather on the name of Jesus which evokes power. Once again let us continue to see how the trial of Peter and John before Sanhedrin unfolds. '*By what power or by what name did you do this?*' the apostles were asked. We know Peter told the crippled, '*In the name of Jesus of Nazareth get up!*' In other words, the name is the power.

Now some of us would say, the name of Jesus has the power of healing, but what is the name to do with teaching and witnessing? Well, the Bible tells us, 'God spoke, and it was done.' The apostles have been commissioned by Jesus. So they were agents of Jesus. When they proclaimed the name of Jesus they knew that they were sharing his power, be it healing power or teaching power.

As the story of chapter 4 comes to conclusion, we are surprised to hear what Sanhedrin told Peter and John. Did they say to them, 'Don't do such healing again?' No. Instead "they charged them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus." They can speak and teach in their own names but not in the name of Jesus. Sanhedrin knew that whenever the name of Jesus was taught by the apostles, it was the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. They didn't really care whether the crippled was healed at all. What really concerned them was the apostles' explanation of Jesus' life, teaching, death and resurrection. Because what the apostles said and taught about Jesus was always a challenge to hearers to change their allegiance from whatever they held dear previously to Jesus.

And in the case of Sanhedrin they were afraid the Jews would be switching their allegiance from their forefathers' religion to Jesus. Notice how clever the Sanhedrin offered the apostles! 'You can speak and teach! Except don't mention the name of Jesus.'

This brings us to this point that Christian teaching always has an offensive element attached to it. The name of Jesus was, still is and forever will be a stumbling block to anyone or any institution who claims to have power over others, or over oneself. And the most subtle way people or institutions try to overcome it is still the same method as Sanhedrin's. In our time this means that one can be Christian without Jesus. One can come to Church without knowing Jesus. So we hear preachers and even churches telling people Jesus is no different to Mohammed, or Buddha or Dalai Lama.

Christian teaching always contains this offensive element because whenever the name of Jesus is expounded in terms of his life, teaching, death and resurrection, it will challenge all sorts of power. But most important of all, it challenges the power of sin, evil and death. It breaks the chain of sin, the bondage of sin and the gate of death. Anyone who responds to the Christian teaching attentively bounds to experience a power that effectively changes one's life inside out.

In the historical sense, we can never say what Peter and John had said, '*We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.*' Because we have not seen the resurrection of Jesus and heard what the risen Lord actually said to us personally. Yet, in another sense, that is, in truth we have to say what Peter and John had said, '*We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.*' The teaching of the apostles now in the written form of the New Testament has the power of conviction on us. Our lives have been changed as much as the lives of the apostles. We were taught by their words as recorded in the NT.

The living God through the gospel of Jesus and the teaching of apostles has judged us and justified us favorably in His Son. This judgment and justification is our personal experience. We cannot but speak of God's judgment and justification that have changed our lives forever. Every Christian in that sense has to continue the teaching of apostles.