

## Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2021 – Acts 5:27-42 ‘On God’s side’

In AD 270 Aurelian became the Roman emperor. He was one of the last great emperors: a renowned military leader who had risen through the ranks, and under whose rule the Roman empire was reunified. The various barbarian invaders were all, in turn, defeated and repelled: the Alamanni, the Goths, the Vandals, and numerous others besides. After his last great victory in 274 AD he returned to Rome and was given the name *Restitutor Orbis* ‘Restorer of the World’. He was also the first emperor to use the phrase ‘dominus et deus’ (master and god) on official written documents, and surviving coins from his time also use the inscription ‘god and born ruler’ to describe him. As an aside, he was a renowned persecutor of the Christian community, too.

Also about AD 270 a young man in Egypt hears a sermon preached on the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19, and is profoundly challenged by the famous verse ‘Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’ The young man felt that this command of Jesus was to be taken literally, and so he did just that. He gave away every possession he had and went to live in the desert for 20 years. During this time he fasted and prayed, and there are colourful tales of fights with devils and demons as he strives to conquer his human nature and give himself wholly and unconditionally to God.

As time goes on, news about this strange but remarkable young man – called Anthony – begins to spread. Little by little others start to copy his example. Tired of the uncertainties of life in the by now fading Roman Empire, first a few, then hundreds, and by the end of the third century *thousands* of people have followed this young man into the desert, fashioning tiny dwellings in rocky outcrops and living as hermits. They start to organise themselves into groups and codify the requirements of this kind of lifestyle. And so begins what becomes known as the monastic movement.

Go back to AD 270 and ask the question: which of these two people was destined to have the greater impact on the world? Whose achievements would endure and prove most transformational? The great, invincible Emperor Aurelian – or the obscure, now penniless, 19-year-old radical heading off to a solitary life in the desert?

A Wise Teacher once said, in by far the greatest sermon of all time: **‘By their fruit you will recognise them.’** The truth is that *you can only really tell the value of something by its long-term impact.* Take the example of Aurelian and Anthony. A year after the ‘Restorer of the World’ returned in triumph to Rome, he was murdered by some of his household officials who lived in fear of Aurelian’s harsh punishments for minor infractions. 10 years later, the empire split into two. 135 years later, Rome was sacked and humiliated by these same tribes which Aurelian had defeated.

On the other hand, the monastic movement thrived. Anthony’s example spread west across North Africa and north into Palestine and Turkey. Over the next 300 years, the monastic movement was responsible for the evangelisation of most of Western Europe, including Britain. By the early 6<sup>th</sup> century St Benedict was forming a monastic vision which shaped Western culture for 1,000 years.

Even now, when you send your kids to school or go for an appointment at the hospital, maybe take a moment to give thanks for St Anthony. It was the monastic houses who first formalised the idea that Christians should educate the local population and treat the sick, and built simple schools and hospitals (attached to their monasteries) to do that. The very word 'hospital' derives from the word 'guest', reflecting the fact that these monastic houses invited all and sundry to stay with them and share their, you guessed it, hospitality. And it all started because one 19-year old decided to take the teaching of Jesus literally. There was no plan, no strategy, no power, no media. Just one inspiring example, and the blessing of God Almighty.

In today's passage, the religious authorities face a dilemma. The new Jesus movement is spreading rapidly, and they don't like it. They're inclined to stamp it out. But a wise old head, Gamaliel – and it's tempting to wonder if Gamaliel had heard Jesus' teaching about looking for the fruit before judging anything – comes forward and gives wise advice. *Look at history, he says: if it's not from God it'll fizzle out. But if it's from God – then we don't want to be on the wrong side...*

So often we humans get our religious thinking the wrong way round. We ask the question: is God on my side? Or: how do I get God on my side? But **the real issue is not whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God's side.** Gamaliel understood that – and the challenge remains as true for us today as ever it did. The church in our generation is facing huge dilemmas: over what we believe, how we should live, how we should organise ourselves, and how to relate to a rapidly changing culture. It's tempting to try and pick a side, or jump to conclusions, or even to use human power to force our view of it.

Perhaps we're better to let God decide: as Gamaliel advises: 'If it is from God, you won't be able to stop it.' (v39) Our task is to keep seeking God's face, to discern what God is really up to, and then to give ourselves wholeheartedly to that: to 'bless what God is already doing', to use a great phrase of a famous Christian leader. Let's not be too quick to decide or to judge: let's stick close to God and trust that his purposes will always, ultimately prevail. **There is only one Restorer of the World, and that is Jesus Christ** – the same yesterday, today and forever. Amen.