

Socrates was arrested for holding false religion and leading students astray. At the trial, he spoke what he believed, saying, “Men of Athens, I respect and love you, but I shall obey the god rather than you, and while I live and am able to continue, I shall never give up philosophy or stop exhorting you and pointing out the truth to any one of you whom I may meet” (*Apology* 29d). The jury found Socrates guilty and made him drink the common poison, hemlock.

Over 400 years later, shortly after the resurrection of Jesus, the apostles Peter and John made a similar declaration in their first brush with the Sanhedrin (4:19). They repeated it in their second brush, which we hear in today’s reading from Acts of the Apostles.

Last week we heard about the many miracles the apostles worked in Solomon’s portico, cementing their popularity among the people. Today we hear how strongly their opposition began to grow. The high priest and the Sadducees, filled with jealousy, arrested the apostles and incarcerated them. During the night, though, the angel of the Lord opened the prison door. The apostles escaped and went right back to the temple area to teach again. The guards awoke to find the prison empty and its doors locked. They returned to the temple, arrested the apostles again, and brought them to trial. The high priest and the Sanhedrin feared for their own lives because the apostles were teaching that the responsibility for Jesus’ death fell to them. They could have killed the apostles right there, but Peter and his companions sounded just like Socrates when they told the high priest, “We must obey God rather than [you].” Far from being silent, the apostles started preaching to the very people who just re-arrested them.

The Sanhedrin wanted to put the apostles to death, but Gamaliel, a respected Pharisee, advised letting them go: “If this... activity is of human origin,” he said, “it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them.” So, they flogged the apostles, “ordered them to stop speaking in the name of Jesus, and dismissed them.” What did the apostles do? They rejoiced “that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. And all day long, both at the temple and in their homes, they did not stop teaching and proclaiming the Messiah, Jesus.”

Their extraordinary example inspires us to obey God, no matter the consequences. Around the world today there are prisoners of conscience with advocates working on their release. Closer to home, any of us may find, because we hold some strong belief, people we love or fear reject us. When someone who can make your life miserable disagrees with you, and you decide to defend your philosophy, you may have to drink the hemlock of their hate. The apostles showed us how to behave: Speak what you believe. Integrity will give you strength. Suffering may follow, but it will seem small compared to the personal consequences of compromising your principles. We may never stand a courtroom trial for what we believe; we may not ever face death from people who oppose our values. It could happen. But every day we confront situations that call for decisions based on faith. When we speak what we believe, we too will rejoice that we have been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name of Jesus.