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Slide 1

One of the boldest, bravest persons I have seen in my life is Tank man. Tank man also known as the unknown protester is the nickname of the mystery Chinese man who stood in front of a column of tanks leaving Tiananmen Square. It was June 1989 and China had just begun a violent crackdown on student dissidents. There was another protest. Shots were fired, the tanks started rumbling down the road when they were stopped before one lone protester.

Slide 2

He was wearing a white shirt and black trousers. He held two shopping bags. And each time the lead tank went to go around him he stepped into its path in a show of nonviolent action. After a while, video footage shows two figures in blue pulling the man away & disappearing with him into a nearby crowd. And no one knows who he is and what happened next. Years later, Tank man featured in Time magazines 100 most important people of the century.

But that takes guts to do that doesn't it? Boldness. Bravery. Tank man believed in his cause so much that he was willing to stand up for the truth, no matter what the consequences. And that is the sort of boldness that the Church needs today. Our societies beliefs are changing. The tide of popular opinion has turned. Those with other agendas are marshalling their forces. And you and I will be forced to make a choice. To follow Christ or follow the crowds? To step out in faith or shrink back in fear? To be bold or to go silent?

That was also the situation in and around 33 AD. Jesus has risen. The church is beginning to grow. And then bang it faces a critical moment in its history. Its first wave of persecution. Where does it come from? From religion. From people who believe in Yahweh, the one true God of the universe. So how would the Church respond? And where would they get the strength and the resources to respond in the way that God wants them to respond? It starts

Slide 3

1. With Boldness in Persecution (verse 1-22)

³ They seized Peter & John & because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day...

⁵ The next day the rulers, the elders & the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. ⁶ Annas the high priest was there & so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander & others of the high priest's family ⁷ They had Peter & John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

Slide 4

This is really de jevu all over again! It was only two months ago the same men stood in judgement over Jesus. They had arrested him. They had questioned him. And they had condemned him to death for preaching the same message that Peter and John were now charged with. Was history going to repeat itself? The apostles could hardly expected justice from this court, could they? Would Peter and John suffer the same fate as their Lord?

And if you remember the first time, Peter had done a runner. He didn't get to be in the court with Jesus but he was completely undone by a servant girl's questions and a servant girl's accusations. "You were with Jesus, weren't you?" "No", Peter had replied, "I don't

even know him!" The situation doesn't look good for Peter or the church in Acts 4.

Slide 5

Except. Except when Peter and John are arrested in Acts 4, we read, ³"They seized Peter & John.... ⁴But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about 5000." You see you can arrest the apostles but you can't arrest the gospel. You can imprison preachers but you can't stop the word of God from going out.

Slide 6

And that is because something else has happened in these last two months. The Spirit of Jesus has come on the Church. Jesus is continuing to do his work in his world but now he is doing it through the Church. Through people like Peter & John. So when the Sanhedrin, the top court in the land ask Peter & John to please explain, this time Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit and responds by saying

Slide 7

"Rulers & elders of the people! ⁹If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame & are being asked how he was healed ¹⁰then know this, you & all the people of Israel: 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."

Now that's bold! What? We are being brought before you because of an act of kindness? Do you really want to put the Church of Jesus Christ on trial for showing kindness to a lame man? Really? The power of Jesus Christ has given a lame man the ability to walk and we have to give an account of ourselves to you? Have I got that one correct?

Besides it is not us on trial here it is **really you**. For this miracle was done in the name of Jesus Christ. The **one you crucified**. But the one that God, the God you say you supposedly serve, this God raised him to life from the dead. ¹¹Jesus is *"the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone."* The cornerstone. The most important stone. The one that keeps the whole structure together & you rejected it. As the Old Testament predicted.

Slide 8

What a mistake! In 1962 a little band called the Beatles tried out for a contract with Decca records in London. But Decca's Dick Rowe chose a band called Brian Poole & the Tremeloes instead. With the famous quote that "The Beatles have *no future* in show business." That's what the Sanhedrin did with Jesus. Jesus has no future. They are the ones that are on trial!

Slide 9

For ¹²Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." There is no other name. Jesus is unique. He is the only one that will save you and me and the whole world. Now that's bold. And it might end up being costly as well if you look at the Sanhedrin's track record. But where did Peter and John get such boldness. Well, the Sanhedrin themselves have a theory.

Slide 10

¹³"When they saw the courage of Peter & John & realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men they were astonished & they took note that **these men had been with Jesus.**" They had been with Jesus. That was the key. Jesus was the one who was driving the Churches agenda. Jesus was the one who was fueling the fire within these disciples.

They had been with Jesus. Being with Jesus had made all the difference. His manner had rubbed off on him. His salvation had changed them. Now his Spirit was giving them the

boldness they were to need. Friends, that isn't rocket science is it? The more we spend with Jesus. The more we are open to God's Holy Spirit, the more we will be able to find the right words at the right time.

So if we want to be bold, we need to know God's word & the object of that word, Jesus. He is the only way. His plans & purposes for this world are the right ones. That might not be popular, that might not be safe but it is right. And so these two men are up against the 71 person Sanhedrin but they are still in the right because they are on God's side. And so when told to keep quiet they reply *"Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you or to him? You be the judges! ²⁰As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."*

Slide 11

Now being bold doesn't mean being arrogant. Boldness is not cockiness, being brash or harsh, speaking loud or shouting, being obnoxious or self-righteous. It is a confidence that God's ways are the right ways. It is a boldness that is not concerned with man's reaction, man's opinion or with threat and harm. And that is what we need as a Church today. Boldness. Boldness even in the midst of opposition and persecution. Boldness to do what is right in God's eyes not in the eyes of the people around us.

Slide 12

Hugh Latimer once preached before King Henry VIII. Henry was greatly displeased by the boldness in the sermon and ordered Latimer to preach again on the following Sunday and apologize for the offence he had given. The next Sunday, after reading his text, he began by saying: *"Hugh Latimer, dost thou know before whom thou are this day to speak? To the high and mighty monarch, the king's most excellent majesty, who can take away thy life, if thou offendest. Therefore, take heed that thou speakest not a word that may displease. But then consider well, Hugh, dost thou not know from whence thou comest--upon whose message thou are sent? Even by the great and mighty God, who is all-present and who beholdeth all thy ways and Who is able to cast thy soul into hell! Therefore, take care that thou deliverest thy message faithfully."* He then preached the same sermon he had preached the preceding Sunday--and with considerably more energy. If only we had the boldness of Latimer & of Peter and John today. Yet having been bold in persecution we next see the disciples have a

Slide 13

2. Boldness in Prayer (verse 23-30)

²³*"On their release, Peter & John went back to their own people & reported all that the chief priests & the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God."* Now when the apostles are released, do they go home & celebrate the win with a meal together or throw a party? No, they immediately start praying. They commit their cause to God. Having been bold in their witness, now we see that they are equally bold in prayer. For it might seem to a casual observer's point of view that the power lies with the Sanhedrin, but we are going to see that real power lies with God.

Slide 14

As someone has said, "Nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer except that which lies outside the will of God." And as the preacher RA Torrey once noted, *"Pray for great things, expect great things, work for great things but above all; pray."* And boy didn't they pray. But they didn't pray the way most of us would pray. I think we would pray to God & say *"Lord please protect us. These are powerful men, who can do us great harm please deliver us from their hands. Please give us peace so that we can continue to live out our Christian lives."*

Slide 15

That's how we would pray but that is not how they pray. Let me make four comments about the prayer that we find in Acts 4. Firstly, it is a united prayer, they prayed together. They came together. Although we can pray by ourselves and we need to pray by ourselves, there is tremendous power and support that we get when we pray with one another. So I wonder, why do we struggle to pray together today? Why do we feel uncomfortable praying aloud in front of someone else? Could that be one of the reasons why we are in our current situation in Australia because we have failed to regularly be united in prayer?

And the second comment I want to make about this prayer is how God centred it is. For it is directed at our sovereign Lord. You see the more you believe that God is in control, the more you will pray to God! Which might mean the flip side is also true, the less we pray individually and together, the less we are putting our trust in our God who is truly sovereign.

Slide 16

Now in this prayer, Peter starts by acknowledging the fact that he is talking to the God of creation, ***"you made the heavens & the earth & the sea & everything in them."*** He is also talking to the God of revelation, ²⁵***"You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage & the peoples plot in vain?"*** And lastly, he is the God of history. ²⁶***"The kings of the earth rise up & the ruler's band together against the Lord & against his anointed one. Indeed Herod & Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles & the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸They did what **your power & will had decided beforehand** should happen."***

You see if God made us and this world, if God has revealed himself to us and to this world and if God is in control of our history then where else would we turn to when we are in need than turn to the Lord?

Please note that thirdly this is a prayer based on Scripture. For in it, Peter quotes Psalm 2, ***"The kings of the earth rise up & the ruler's band together against the Lord & against his anointed one."*** This is a passage written 1000 years beforehand that was just as true in Peter's time as it was in King David's time. For this word of God is still alive! And finding fresh application to the situation that the early Church has found itself in.

Slide 17

And lastly please note what Peter prayed for. He didn't pray for personal, individual needs but he prayed that the work of Jesus would continue to go forward. ***"Now, Lord, consider their threats & enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."*** Peter doesn't pray for a stop to their persecution, he prays for boldness in the midst of persecution. And he doesn't pray for just miracles, he prays for miracles of mercy. ³⁰***"Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs & wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."***

Friends we could learn much from this prayer. It was the American preacher Philip Brooks who said: ***"Don't pray for an easy life, pray for God to make you stronger! Don't pray for tasks equal to your power, but for power equal to your tasks!"***

You see the key to the boldness of the apostles was they were spending time with the Lord in prayer. They were asking for boldness from God in prayer. As someone has said "Prayer is not an escape from responsibility, it is our response to God's ability". For true prayer equips us and energises us to face whatever life throws at us. So, we see

Slide 18

3. Boldness in persecution, boldness in prayer and lastly boldness in possessions.

“All the believers were one in heart & mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.” For this Christian community adopted a bold goal. That they would make sure there was no one in need. No-one. So they pooled their resources. They looked after each other. They shared everything they had.

Now some have said this is a form of 1st century communism. Except communism says “What is yours is everyone’s”. Whereas Christianity says “What is mine is yours.” You see the difference? One is about making sure everyone has exactly the same access to resources. Whereas what the early Church was doing was modelling a generosity which is modelled on God’s generosity to us!

Slide 19

So much so that no-one claimed his possession as his own. Although in law they continued to own goods, yet in heart and mind they had an attitude so radical that it wasn’t just about me and my family but about my Christian community. And because they felt so strongly about this, they made sacrificial sharing a part of this community. So we have this picture of a guy called Barnabas, a man we are going to be introduced to a number of times throughout the book of Acts. This leader of the Christian community decides to put his money where his mouth was and sells a property of his and then lays the money at the disciple’s feet.

So why don’t we try and bring that into today’s world. He is not selling his house but a field. A place where he would work and develop an income from his family from. If we were to sell an acre or two just out of Newcastle what would that raise. \$500,000? A million dollars? Well it would be like a modern day Barnabas saying, I don’t need it. There are people in the family who do. And so, he sells it. And brings in the money. And puts it at the apostle’s feet.

Slide 20

Reformer John Calvin writes in his commentary, *“We must have hearts that are harder than iron if we are not moved by the reading of this narrative. In those days the believers gave abundantly of what was their own, we in our day are content not just jealously to retain what we possess but callously to rob others. They sold their own possession in those days, in our day it is the lust to purchase that reigns supreme.”*

No wonder the Church was growing. For people could hear the message ringing out loud and clear and could see the message working out in everyday life. They were confronted by the disciple’s boldness but also aware of their great compassion. So what is the key to this sort of boldness when it comes to their possessions?

Slide 21

³¹ *“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken & they were all filled with the Holy Spirit & spoke boldly. All the believers were one in heart & mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.”* The key was that they have been filled with the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost the Spirit had come down on each believer but here in Acts 4 we see the Spirit flows outward from each believer

It was the presence of Jesus that made the believer bold in the midst of persecution. It was being with the Father that made them bold in prayer. And now we see it is being filled with the Holy Spirit that enabled the believers to be bold in their generosity to one another. You

see the more we are with the Lord, Father, Son and Holy Spirit the more his heart for the world, his heart for the lost, his heart for the church rubs off on us.

Slide 22

But note here the people did not just have the Holy Spirit they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Now the Bible teaches that we receive the Holy Spirit the moment we trust Jesus Christ as our Lord & Saviour. The Spirit of God literally comes within our bodies & lives with us for the rest of our lives. It's a one-time event, and He never leaves us. But sometimes the power isn't on, the connection with God isn't there. To be filled with the Spirit means that we are completely controlled by the Spirit. We have the Spirit and we are open to the Spirit.

I love the story about the Negro Church where they had an open prayer time and there was one guy who every week would pray in a loud voice, "Lord fill me with your Spirit. Lord I need your Spirit. Father I desire a fresh touch of your Spirit." He did this every week until one old lady had had enough, and so in a loud voice prayed. "Lord don't do it. He leaks!"

Well the thing is we all leak! That's why we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit, we need to pray more together and individually and we need to spend more time with Jesus. That's the secret behind the apostle's boldness, they were filled with God. Overflowing with God's power. Consumed by God's passion. Filled with God's Spirit.

Slide 23

And if that were to happen, we would be given the sort of boldness the early Church had and the sort of boldness the current Church needs. We would find that we would be bold even when the temperature rises. We would be prayerful when the tough times come. We would be generous with one another and there would be no needy people amongst us. We would be bold ready to face whatever twist of history God allows next!

Slide 24

Let me end with the story of Telemachus, a 4th century Christian who lived in a remote village, who tended his garden and spent much time in prayer. One day, he thought he heard the voice of God telling him to go to Rome, so he obeyed, setting out on foot. Some weeks later, weary from the journey, he arrived in Rome about the time of a great festival.

The little monk followed the crowd surging down the streets into the Colosseum. He saw the gladiators and realized these men were going to fight to the death to entertain the crowd. The crowd cheered, but Telemachus cried out loudly "In the name of Christ, STOP!" He pushed his way through the crowd, climbed over the wall and dropped onto the floor of the arena, a tiny man before huge gladiators, saying, "In the name of Christ, STOP!!!" The crowd started laughing. One of the gladiators plunged a sword into Telemachus' body. He fell to the sand. As he was dying, his last words were, "In the name of Christ, STOP!!!!"

Then a strange thing happened. The gladiators stood there looking at the tiny monk lying there dead. A hush fell over the Colosseum. Way up in the upper rows, a man stood and made his way to the exit. Others followed. In dead silence, one by one, everyone left the Colosseum. The year was 391 and that was the last battle to the death between gladiators in the Roman Colosseum. Never again in the great stadium did men kill each other for the entertainment of the crowd - all because one man spoke the truth BOLDLY in God's name.

Slide 25

Remember 2 Timothy 1:7 *"For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline."*