

## TJW, HT, 21.9.08, 9.15am & 11am, Acts 2.1-21

Do you know that we're driving more slowly on motorways than a year ago? Data from surveillance cameras has proved this - and it's presumably to save petrol. And recently the profits at Aldi have shot up. The sale of baked beans has gone up, but the sale of organic food has dropped through the floor.

Of course it's the credit crunch, and the big price rises that have come it.

For some of us here there'll be real struggles in this - and for some people who bought a house at the wrong time, things are very tough.

We rely so much on money and economics to make our lives secure - and maybe when the economy all gets shaken up a bit, as it is right now, God is speaking to us through it to tell us to put our security not in a place where things can down as well as up - but to put it in the one place where there is real, eternal security - in the faithful God who keeps his promises and who never changes.

Now we're continuing to look at the book of Acts this morning - and of course Acts was originally written for Christians who were facing much bigger insecurities than we are. They lived in a world where persecution for speaking about Christ was a real possibility.

And through this book, God was bringing them - as he's also bringing us today - back to the certainty, the security, the power of who he is and what he's done in us - urging us to make that, and that alone, the anchor for our lives.

Today we come to the crucial part of the beginning of Acts, where Jesus sends the Holy Spirit into his followers - what's called the Day of Pentecost.

'Pentecost' was the name of a Jewish religious festival. It was called that because 'Pentecost' is the Greek word for 'fifty', and it came 50 days after their big Passover festival.

Let's see how it happens - Acts chapter 2 [READ verses 1-4].

Everything that happens here is designed to show that...

### **1. when The Holy Spirit comes: God comes in power (verses 1-4).**

God doesn't tell us here exactly what it was like to be there experiencing it.

Do you see in verse 2 it says that the sound was like the blowing of a violent wind.

And in verse 3 they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire resting on them.

It was such a powerful, one-off event that it's hard to describe in words. Those old paintings of it you see, where all the apostles have a little pilot-light flame sticking out the top of their heads, don't do it justice.

But in the context of the whole Bible it's pretty clear what the wind and the fire symbolise.

In the Old Testament, strong wind is often a symbol of God's powerful presence by his Spirit.

And fire is similar - it's a sign of God's presence. Think of the burning bush where God met with Moses.

But we can say even more than that about what this fire means - because three years earlier John the Baptist had predicted that this day of Pentecost would come, and he did by talking about fire. So turn back a bit to Luke 3.15 [READ verses 15-17].

Here the Holy Spirit coming with fire is linked to Jesus coming as saviour and judge - saving those who belong to him, and judging and punishing those who don't.

So, back in Acts, the symbols of wind and fire are telling us that, when the Holy Spirit comes into our lives, that is God himself coming into our lives - he's really present, with his extraordinary power.

And there's a hint here, too, that it will be through Jesus' own followers that he'll be at work - at work as saviour, bringing salvation to those who trust the message they hear - and one day at work as judge, for those who reject him.

You might remember that a couple of weeks ago we said that the best title for this book of Acts was: 'the continuing acts of Jesus Christ, through his apostles, by the power of the Spirit.'

And here we see Jesus keeping his promise.

Even though he's in heaven and not on earth, he's still at work.

Even though we can't see him, his own presence, the power of God that will bring salvation and judgment to the world, is in us.

If you've put your trust in Christ, he is closer to you than he ever was to the disciples when he literally walked beside them on the earth - because now the power of his presence is literally in you.

There's the reality of God in your life that no one before Pentecost could consciously experience.

What a wonderful gift Christ gave us, when he went to be with his Father.

But for the apostles the Spirit brought a particular gift - see from verse 4 [READ verses 4-11].

These events demonstrate that...

## **2. The Gospel of Jesus - is for everyone (verses 5-11).**

Let me say a word here about these 'tongues'.

Jerusalem at Pentecost-time back then was full of Jewish people from all around the Middle East and North Africa and southern Europe. What Jesus gave the apostles the gift to do that day, was to speak in different languages to all these people from around the world, telling them that Christ was Lord and Saviour.

If you've ever struggled trying to learn a foreign language at school, or by listening to a tape, you might be quite jealous of the gift God gave them that day!

One other part of the Bible - 1 Corinthians - mentions speaking in tongues. And of course many Christians today speak in tongues.

Some Christians say they've experienced God giving them the ability to speak in a language they'd never learned - but that doesn't seem to be very common.

The tongues-speaking mentioned in 1 Corinthians, and in most Christian churches now, has a different purpose than in Acts. It's for individuals to praise God for themselves, rather than to proclaim him to others. It may not even be a real language, but instead a gift God gives to some people to praise him with sounds that go beyond words.

At Pentecost, it's clear that that gift, at the very birth of the Christian church, was given to teach Christians that the message about Jesus was now for people from every nation - and that Jesus would equip them, by the Spirit, to proclaim that message.

So when we read Acts 2 it's vital that we don't get distracted by the issue of speaking in tongues.

When I was aged about 20 and hadn't been a Christian very long, I met one Christian who told me that because I didn't speak in tongues I wasn't really full of the Holy Spirit. But the New Testament makes clear that that's nonsense, and it's not what Acts 2 teaches.

Instead, we need to hear those two same lessons that Acts 2 is teaching:

The message of Jesus is simply for everyone.

These apostles lived in a multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-religious world, just like we do.

And they boldly spent their lives teaching people that the way to God is found not in being sincere about your own beliefs, not in obeying your own system of morality - but only in coming to Jesus Christ.

Nothing new has happened in the last 2000 years to allow us to downplay the urgency of this.

The message is for everyone... and Jesus equips his people so they can bring it to everyone. Of course we don't need to speak a foreign language to speak to people about Jesus - which is a big relief for most of us.

I did in fact study French at university - but trying to speak it again on holiday in France this summer just reminded of how much French I've forgotten!

All we need, as Christians, is to be convinced that Jesus really has equipped us for the task - because with the Holy Spirit, he has.

So often for us that power within us is like electricity - you only know it's there when you flick the switch and put it into action and the power flows - putting yourself in a position where Jesus can use you to be a vehicle for his message to others.

Back to that scene in Jerusalem - with the apostles amazing everybody by speaking in the street about Jesus in languages they'd never learned.

And someone calls out: "What on earth is going on here?" - verse 12 [READ verses 12-20].

Peter stands up, because he wants the crowd to know what's happening. And he starts by saying this:

### **3. The Holy Spirit - is now for anyone (verses 12-20).**

He starts by having a joke with the crowd, which is always a good way to start: “Some of you think we’re drunk - but it’s only 9 in the morning - and we don’t start on the wine that early!”.

Then he says to them: what you’re seeing here is exactly what the prophet Joel foretold in his writings all those years ago.

Now all the people Peter is speaking to were Jewish, so they would have known exactly what he was talking about: that Joel, in the Old Testament, had said that a day would come when God would send his Spirit onto all kinds of people - young and old, men and women.

You see in the Old Testament the Holy Spirit is described as coming just on certain people - only a few, and just to equip them for specific tasks for God.

Through Joel, God promised that one day it would no longer be a drop of the Holy Spirit here, and a drop there - like light drizzly rain. Instead it would be an outpouring (verse 17), a downpour of the Holy Spirit, available to everyone.

Joel had said that people would see visions, dream dreams, and would prophesy. Peter says: and what he foretold is happening right now in what you’re seeing at Pentecost.

So here the ‘dreams, visions and prophecy’ which Joel talked about are fulfilled in the apostles - and in us too - who know God through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Spirit - and who are empowered through the Spirit to witness to him.

Parts of the New Testament later on do speak about a specific group of people called “prophets”, but that’s not what Peter’s talking about here.

He using the Old Testament to say: the glorious day when God promised that people would know him deeply, through a deep life-transforming relationship with him through the Holy Spirit - that day has come.

In verses 19 and 20 Peter talks about “signs and wonders” - and it’s hard to know exactly what he’s referring to.

The sun being turned to darkness might look back 7 weeks or so to Good Friday, when the sky went black in the middle of the day when Jesus died - as a sign that a new age was dawning.

But the ‘wonders’ in the heavens’ probably looks forward to the end of the current age of the Spirit, when Christ will come again, to be present on earth no longer just by his Spirit, but now fully in person.

In a perverse way it’s tempting for us to try to wind back the clock to Old Testament days - when the reality of the Spirit in your life was only for a precious few - a king, or a priest - to imagine that God hasn’t promised that the full reality of the Holy Spirit can be for anyone - old, young - man, woman - confident, shy - clever, simple.

If you have put your trust in Christ, Pentecost has come to you. A promise God made centuries ago has come to you - God himself has come to you and into you. You share in the age of the Spirit. You

know the Lord deeply. He's done it for you, and the clock can't be wound back.

You have the knowledge of God that was promised centuries ago - so let's rejoice in it more - enjoy it more.

And then Peter quotes one final verse from Joel, to reveal what all of this is for - verse 21 [READ].

**4. Salvation is - for anyone (verse 21).**

Of course when Joel wrote those words, for 'Lord' he said 'Yahweh' - the name that God gave for himself to his people Israel, in the Old Testament.

But when Peter stands up in Jerusalem - two months after Christ's resurrection and a few days after Jesus' ascension into heaven - when he says 'the Lord', he means Jesus: God himself, now revealed to us in God the Son.

I bought a new laptop last week, and it was faulty. And trying to get through to the help-desk to report the fault wasn't fun. I hung on the line for ages, while they kept telling me how important my call was to them, and that I was now 17<sup>th</sup> in the queue.

It's frustrating when you want to get your call straight through but you can't.

But if you have ever called on the name of Christ - that is, if you have ever in your heart thrown yourself on his mercy - given up thinking that you're going to heaven because you're a nice person, and have cried out to him for forgiveness - if you've ever given up

living life by your own rules and put Christ's words in the driving seat - then you simply have been saved, and you will be saved.

Maybe some of need to let the simple, reassuring, certain power of that promise from God sink in to us this morning.

Because in the end everything we read in Acts about the Spirit is here to lead us to Christ.

The Spirit is the one sent by Christ, to serve Christ.

And in this age of the Spirit, until Christ comes again - the Holy Spirit comes in power on anyone who comes to Christ - and anyone can come, straight to Christ.