

Cut to the heart

Read Acts 2 v 22-41 and then pray: *Lord God Almighty, your Word is living and active. It is sharper than any double-edged sword. Your Word penetrates deep into our souls and spirits. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts. It cuts to the very heart of us. May your Word do its vital work in us and bring us to repentance, forgiveness, peace, hope and joy – through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*

Over the past two weeks, it has been my privilege to lead you through one of the most significant sermons ever preached. It is amazing to think that Peter's Pentecost message was his debut sermon. Yet through this sermon, following on from the mighty descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples in Jerusalem – the Church of the Living God was born, and many who were part of the vast crowd gathered that morning were to be added to the initial modest number of 120 disciples. (1:15, 2:41)

Peter essentially had two parts to his sermon. The first part introduces a passage from the prophet Joel concerning the **massive historic downpour of the Holy Spirit** that would occur in the last days – and has now finally arrived. The Spirit has been poured out lavishly by the Lord Jesus, now exalted on high; the Spirit has come in a new and comprehensive way upon *all God's people*. The Spirit has brought and distributed gifts (tongues and preaching), and He has anointed all God's people to be prophetic. (2:17-18) He has brought a new covenant into the hearts and lives of God's people with a new power that will enable them to take the gospel of God's Kingdom to the ends of the earth! (1:8)

But then Peter has quickly moved on in his sermon to explain **the facts** about the Divine Person who has poured out the Spirit that day. Jesus of Nazareth, the man from the obscure village in north, the man who worked hundreds of miracles, signs and wonders in the sight of all the people, the man who was cruelly and unjustly crucified just weeks earlier **but who was then** raised to life by God and exalted to His right hand; this is the One who now pours out the Spirit of life and power in their midst!

Now as Peter has been **preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit**, something powerful has gradually been building up in the lives many of his listeners. Preaching is not merely a human activity. It is a Divine activity working through a weak human life – a preacher. God is speaking to others, but doing so through a chosen vessel – in this case – the apostle Peter. There is a combination of **two** powers working in the lives of the listeners at the same time. Those two powers are *the power of God's Word* and *the power of God's Spirit*. As we are told in **Hebrews 4 v 12 ff**, the Word of God is like an extremely sharp sword which can penetrate the human heart like nothing else. Its power and purity are razor sharp. It can cut through the hardest of hearts like a hot knife cuts through butter. But when the Word *travels in partnership* with the person and power of the Holy Spirit – an irrepressible combination is formed. The piercing and penetration of the human heart is decisive. As Paul says to the Ephesians – the Word of God is the *"sword of the Spirit"*. (Ephesians 6:17) And the Holy Spirit is an excellent Swordsman. He takes the mighty cutlass of the Word of God coming through the humble preacher, and He applies it to the hard and sinful human heart – and the heart can either *harden further* or *give way* to the love of God. On the day of Pentecost many hearts were overcome, and they opened up and gave way to the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit.

We are told something highly significant in **Acts 2:37**. We are informed that after Peter had decisively delivered the facts about the Lord Jesus Christ – his death, resurrection and exaltation – the people who heard his words **were cut to the heart**. (Read v 36-37) That is a very telling phrase given to us by Luke. The hearers were moved in their hearts by the piercing power and purity of God's Word delivered by Peter in the power of the Spirit. They were cut to the heart! In other words, they were very deeply convicted by the truth and power of what Peter had just said. They knew that he had spoken the truth, and they knew that they had to respond to the truth on that very day with no delay!

People cannot come into the Kingdom of God and be *added to the Church* (Acts 2:41 & 47) without **first being deeply convicted of their sin and their need for Jesus**. Only those who *mourn* for their sin and their dire need for a Saviour will be *comforted*. What we have here in Acts 2: 37 is the classic archetypal work of the Spirit prior to a person's conversion and entrance into the Kingdom of God. All who enter the Kingdom of God are *cut to the heart by the Spirit of God* who moves through the power of God's Word "to convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement." (John 16:8). Let me therefore ask you a direct question. Have you ever been *cut to the heart*? Have you personally experienced the work of the Spirit in your heart pointing out that you are guilty of sin before God and therefore under his judgement? Have you ever felt that burning witness of the Spirit within you telling you to repent and to flee to Jesus for salvation? Have you been cut to the heart as these people were on the day of Pentecost? Has the truth of the gospel about your sin and Jesus's salvation penetrated your hard heart and caused you to desperately ask the question: **What must I do?**

And so, we have reached the second critical question in this chapter. Many in the crowd, now deeply convicted of their sin and realising that they are presently under the judgement of God, ask with urgency and honesty; *What shall we do?* Given the fact that *their actions* and *their sin* contributed to the Son of God being cruelly crucified (as our sin and actions have also done), *What should they do?* **Even more to the point – What should we do?** What should anyone's response be to Peter's sermon?

There are two emphatic responses needed from a person who has been *cut to the heart*. **Firstly, and foremostly** they **MUST repent**. No individual enters the Kingdom of heaven or experiences salvation and rescue by Jesus *unless they repent*. Repentance is the gateway into eternal life. But what is repentance? Repentance is fundamentally about radical change! Repentance involves a stark change of direction and mindset. It critically involves changes to your attitude toward the Lord Jesus Christ who died for you, and changes in your attitude to God's demands upon you to live a life of obedience and holiness. You must change direction radically.

To illustrate; imagine you get on a train from Sheffield and head south to London. But then suddenly you decide to get off that train at the next station and instead head due north to Edinburgh in Scotland. That is repentance. You left a particular train going south and then got on another going north! With regards the gospel – you get off a train marked **Self, Sinful, and Godless** – and get on board one marked **Sorrow, Saviour and Surrender**. Repentance always involves a two-way process – *a turning from* and *a turning toward*. You **turn from** sin, selfishness and self-centredness, and **toward** the Saviour and the new life of the Spirit which is marked by holiness, love and truth. You actively and decisively decide to live not for "You" but for "God". That is repentance. This involves a change of heart, mind, will and aspiration. In a military sense - it is an about turn. (see Matthew 21: 28-32)

What Peter's hearers were told to do in effect was, instead of rejecting Jesus, they must embrace him as Saviour and honour him with their love and obedience. And in order to embrace the Saviour and Exalted One, they must back down from their sin and sinful lives and instead *follow and obey Him as their new Lord*. This is something that **must be done!** We too must put this into action! We must make this decisive step for ourselves and undergo great change! Are you ready for this? Are you willing for this? If you are – then you have been pre-prepared by the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart for entrance into the Kingdom of God, into life in all its fullness, with freedom, forgiveness, peace, joy and new power for living. John the Baptist and then Messiah Jesus spoke with one voice; **Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!** (Mark 1:4 & 15). Repentance is non optional.

Peter then tells his hearers that they must also be **baptised** with water. Baptism would be the public demonstration and outward symbolism of the new step forward into life with Jesus Christ. It would powerfully symbolise the internal washing and forgiving and freeing work that was taking place through the Holy Spirit. Baptism would show the world that you were **personally identify yourself**

with Jesus and his death and resurrection. It would openly reveal that you are repenting, you are dying to your old life and rising to newness of life in Jesus and in Holy Spirit. You are being washed clean as you enter the community of the Church, the community of the baptised and born again!

We read that 3000 were baptised that day *into or in the name of Jesus*. (v41) That means that most of the day was taken up, not with preaching, but with Peter and the eleven baptising 3000 souls over a period of many hours. What an awesome spectacle that must have been. Such joy and praise and movement into the Kingdom of God and the Church community! If you want to understand whether or not the Church in any situation is growing – ask this question. How many baptisms of new believers have there been? We must also understand that in some countries today, where the population is majority Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist, to undergo baptism is to say farewell not just to your sin, but to your family, to your community, to your job and may be to your life. Such is the bold statement made by a baptised person. To be baptised in certain countries today – is to almost sign to your death warrant.

Peter points out the need for **repentance** and **baptism**, not because he just plucked those two ideas from the air but because of the direct command of Jesus Christ the Master! (Matthew 28: 18-20, Luke 24: 46-49). We urge repentance because Jesus did and he told us to do so also. We baptise because Jesus told us to baptise in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!

But Peter then outlines what those who repent, believe and baptise **receive**. They receive **two** glorious gifts, both of which were promises of the now present and available new covenant which Jesus had signed and sealed through pouring out his precious blood. The two gifts that would flow into the lives of 3000 souls that day were the **forgiveness of sins** and the **gift of the Holy Spirit**. (v38) Jeremiah had prophesied that the new covenant would mean that *all sins (all sins) would be forgiven and forgotten by God* (Jeremiah 31:34) as people came to know the Lord personally; and Ezekiel added that the new covenant would mean people could receive the *sprinkling of the renewing and revitalising power of the Spirit, whose presence in the new heart would enable joyful obedience*. (Ezekiel 36:25-26).

Peter is therefore declaring that the those who “accept his message” will be entering into this new covenant relationship with all its cleansing and renewing power, life and freedom. If the truth sets you free, you shall be free indeed said Jesus. Free from the guilt of all our sin and all our tragic, regretful and sad failings; freedom from our guilty consciences and Gods’ judgement upon the sin we commit which destroys life around us; freedom to receive new hearts and a clean slate; freedom at long last to enjoy peace of heart and peace of mind; freedom to receive the precious gift of God’s own presence into our lives, the Holy Spirit, who by his presence enables us to live with new power and hope.

When a person truly receives these two promised gifts of full forgiveness and the Spirit of the living God into their hearts and lives – the change that takes place could not be greater. There really is new birth, new life and new power. They become **new creations in Christ – the old has gone – the new has come!** (2 Corinthians 5:17). They step out into a new world, a different Kingdom with a new heart and a new mindset – a mindset which loves to follow the Living God. (Romans 8:5-9). Have you received the joy of full forgiveness? Do you experience and know the living water of the Spirit? Have you moved from death to life, from separation from God to reconciliation and friendship with God?

Peter directs the crowds toward repentance and baptism so that they might truly know forgiveness and the Spirit of God invading their lives. It is a large crowd which he is addressing, but notice how he personalises the message for **each one**. “Repent and be baptised **every one of you.....**” It was important that each one responded then, and it is important that **each one of us** also responds. We must understand that we enter the Kingdom of God in *single file*. **Each one** in turn. When did you personally enter into this relationship with God through Jesus and with the power of the Spirit? God

deals with us on a one to one basis – but then brings us into a community and a Kingdom where we experience fellowship and unity with many others in a most beautiful way (Acts 2:42-27).

Look at it another way – with the help of this passage of Scripture. Peter reveals that *“the promise is for you, and your children and all who are far off (in the future) - for all whom the Lord our God will call.”* On this day, God was personally calling *each one* of the 3000 into his Kingdom. God was drawing them into the large fishing net. God, through the effectual working of his Spirit and his Word was convicting *each one* of their sin and their need for Jesus, *each of* the need to repent and be baptised. It was a personal call from Christ. Have you heard the call of God in your heart? Have you been drawn by the Father toward the Son and his Kingdom? Have you felt the drawing power of the Spirit in your heart? Do you know what I am talking about when I refer to personally being **called by God**?

Jesus said; *“No one can come to me UNLESS the Father draw him.”* (John 6:44). He also said to his disciples. *“You did not choose me but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.”* (John 15:16). Does this ring true to you? Have you heard the calling of the Father? Have you sensed in your heart the wooing, the entreating of God to come to His waters of life and drink? Can you personally relate to the words of Philip Doddridge about a happy day? (1702-51)

*‘Tis done, the great transaction done; I am the Lord’s and he is mine:
He **drew me** and I followed on, charmed to confess **the voice divine.***

Have you been drawn in by the divine voice calling out to you? Have you said from the depths of your heart; *“Here I am Lord – it is I Lord – I have heard you calling in the night”*

I close with a sense of fascination and admiration for Peter’s bold, direct and honest preaching which led to the saving of 3000 souls and their addition into the new-born Church. Peter must have felt a tremendous anointing of the Spirit as he preached, and that many souls were *“on their way into”* the Kingdom of God. But he nevertheless, continues preaching, urging and warning the crowds for some time until he senses the movement from the Kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of light is actually happening. We are told that Peter, like John the Baptist of old, **pleaded** (v40) with the crowds to vacate the world which is crooked and depraved and enter into God’s saving love. (see Galatians 1: 3-5)

I seriously wonder whether we still possess this urgency and passion displayed in Peter’s preaching and pleading today? Have we truly grasped that this world and its desires is fallen, corrupt and passing away? (I John 2: 15-17). The world is wearing out. In Luke 9: 41 we have our Lord crying out; *“O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?”* Peter urges his listeners to *“save themselves”*, to *“make the break”* from their unbelieving and crooked generation while there is time and opportunity. They must call upon the Lord’s name and be saved. (2:21)

The call to *“come out”* remains. We are still **strongly urged**, to use the words of John the Baptist, *“to flee from the coming wrath.”* (Luke 3:7-8) We are urged to take up our cross and follow Christ – to leave the world behind – to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. In Paul’s words, we are called to be *“blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.”* (Philippians 2:15-16)

The apostle Peter **held out the word of life** on that Pentecost day. As he spoke to the crowds, he begged them to respond to the message which he held out to them like a life buoy would be held out to a drowning man. **Thank God** 3000 of them reached back and took the life-line message to heart, accepted it for themselves (v41), and stepped forward to be baptised, and then experienced the joy and release of forgiveness and the entrance of the Holy Spirit into their transformed lives! **Amen**