

ACTS 2.38- 41: GOD WANTS A RESPONSE!

[Chelmsford 31 May 2009]

Today is Pentecost Sunday – the Christian equivalent of 5th November.

On that day God set fire to his church!

The Holy Spirit came down in power and, whoosh, the church rocketed into orbit!

Originally ‘Pentecost’ was a Jewish festival.

The term was derived from the Greek word for ‘fiftieth’ (*pentecostos*), and was used by Greek-speaking Jews to describe a Jewish festival which came fifty days after the festival of Passover.

This Jewish festival was actually a harvest festival, which among Hebrew- and Aramaic-speaking Jews was known as ‘the feast of weeks’ or ‘the day of the first fruits’.

It also became the day when Jews celebrated God giving the Law to Moses.

On that first Christian Pentecost Sunday, Jerusalem was crowded with thousands of visitors from all over the known world, not for a Christian jamboree, but to celebrate a Jewish Festival.

But on that day God sent his Holy Spirit

And so in the Christian calendar Pentecost has become a day for celebrating the gift of the Spirit and the birth of the church.

But it is also a day for baptizing. Hence the old term ‘Whit/White Sunday’. For at one stage in the history of the church all those being baptised dressed up in white robes.

Indeed, when I was baptised as a 13 year old boy, I had to wear a white robe – I shall never forget that as I entered the water, my gown began to rise up because it had not been properly weighted! Thank God, things have changed.

Earlier in the service we read of the first Whit baptismal service, when 3000 people were baptised. Even if all 12 apostles had shared in the service, it would have meant 250 people each. Wow!

Listen to what happened on that first Whit Sunday.

- Peter preached a powerful sermon, in which he accused his hearers of having crucified God’s Son. But, he said, God has reversed your sentence of death on Jesus by raising him from the dead – **“we are all witnesses of this fact”** (v32). We’ve seen Jesus - *‘There’s no longer room for doubt’* (Peterson). So there!
- Not surprisingly his listeners were **“deeply troubled”** and cried out, **“What shall we do?”** Peter replied: **“Each one of you must turn away from your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive God’s gift, the Holy Spirit”**. Luke goes on: **“Many of them believed his message and were baptised, and about 3000 were added to the group that day”**.

I.e. In the light of what God has done for us in Jesus, God wants us to do four things:

1. TURN FROM YOUR SIN

Peter held his congregation responsible for the death of Jesus. He tells them quite bluntly: “**You killed Jesus by letting sinful men crucify him**” (v23). ‘Because of you the Lord Jesus went to his death – Roman soldiers may have actually banged in the nails, but you were responsible – his blood is on your hands’! So “**each one of you must turn away from your sins**” – each one of you must “**repent**”.

At this point we may feel a little smug: we may not be perfect, but at least we had no hand in the death of Jesus. Indeed, we have the best of alibis: we weren’t around! Yet as far as God is concerned our alibis just won’t stand up. From his perspective, ***we did have a hand in the death of his Son***, even though we were born 20 centuries later. For every time we sin, we thump the nails even deeper into the hand of Jesus. We too share responsibility in his death. It was in fact because of us that Jesus came. So it’s not just Peter’s contemporaries who needed to “**turn away from**” their “**sins**” – we too need to “**repent**”

But hang on a moment, Peter, someone might say.

- I have done nothing of which I should be ashamed.
- Fine, call football hooligans to repentance, call drug pushers to repentance, call child molesters to repentance, for that matter, call aunt Matilda with her vicious tongue to repentance - but don’t speak to me like that – for I’m a decent bloke.

But in the Bible repentance is not about being sorry for particularly wicked sins - it is about changing direction.

For sin is essentially egocentricity - it is ME FIRST.

It is this cardinal sin of self-centeredness from which all other sins stem.

We may distinguish between our greed and the greed that lands up people in Chelmsford Prison, but from God’s viewpoint we are all as bad as one another.

That’s why Peter speaks of “**Each one**” of us having to turn away from our sins. Each one of us needs to change direction – each one of us needs to put God first & begin to go his way.

This is what the 3000 did. And this is what Matthew is doing.

In being baptised he is making public his resolve to die to self – i.e. to turn away from a self-centred way of living and instead live for God.

2. BE BAPTISED

Secondly Peter told his congregation to “**be baptised in the name of Jesus so that your sins will be forgiven**”. And that is precisely what happened. Luke records “**Many of them believed his message and were baptised**” (v41).

In NT times there was no difference between believing and being baptised – for baptism was a kind of *public ‘demo’* in which you demonstrated that you believed in Jesus.

When people came to faith in Jesus, they expressed their faith in the Son of God who loved them and gave himself for them.

Just think on that for a moment. Jesus, the Son of God, loved us so much that he gave his life for you and me. That is what is at the heart of Christian faith. It takes some believing.

I don't know what your views are on vivisection, but I would have thought that the most ardent of anti-vivisectionists would have to admit that the suffering of even a 1000 mice is as nothing compared with the suffering of a child for even an hour.

There is all the difference between a child and mice.

But the Christian Gospel centres on the death of no ordinary child – but rather on the death of the Son of God. What's more, this Son of God died in no laboratory experiment, he died on a Cross for you and me – that you and I might be forgiven. That's what Matthew believes – and that's what God wants you to believe too.

This is what is at the heart of baptism.

The call to be baptised = not a call to get wet – nor even a call to get wet all over.

It is a call to put our faith in Jesus, who died that we might be forgiven.

You see God in his love doesn't force his gift of forgiveness upon us – he simply offers us that gift – we have to respond by stretching out the hand of faith and receiving that gift.

In baptism Matthew will be responding to that love:

- as he goes under the water he will be saying: “**Yes, Jesus, you died for me**”
- as he rises from the water, he will be saying “**Yes Jesus you rose for me**”

It is not enough to turn from our sins - we must also express our faith in Jesus by being baptised!

3. RECEIVE THE SPIRIT

“Each one of you must turn away from your sins and be baptized...; and you will receive God's gift, the Holy Spirit”.

Unlike the first two responses to repent & be baptised, this is not a command, but *a promise*.

To those who turn away from their sins & who put their trust in Jesus, God gives his Spirit This is what Pentecost is all about – this is what we are celebrating today.

God's Spirit is not reserved for the spiritual ‘greats’ - the Spirit is God's gift to Matthew and indeed to all who believe.

Who is the Holy Spirit? ***The Spirit is the presence of God in our hearts.***

It is the Spirit who makes God real to us – who enables us to enter into a new intimate relationship with God Almighty, a relationship in which we can call God Father.

This is what happened to those first disciples on the Day of Pentecost – they were overwhelmed by the sense of God's presence in their midst.

Filled with God's Spirit, these disciples who previously had been almost afraid of their own shadows, found themselves having to tell others of the great things that God had done for them.

That was *the true miracle of Pentecost – God became real* in the hearts and lives of those who loved him. Compared to that, the wind & the fire & the ability to speak in other languages were unimportant.

Yes, at Pentecost Jesus kept his promise of sending to his disciples another 'Helper'. God does not intend his children to live life on their own strength. He gives us his Spirit – to guide, support, strengthen, empower.

After Matthew has been baptised, we shall lay hands on him and pray that God will fill him afresh with his Spirit – that he too may be fearless in telling others of the great things that God has done for him.

God wants to bless him with his Spirit – as he wants to bless you too!

4. JOIN THE CHURCH

The 4th response Peter's hearers made that day was to join the church.

For many the idea of joining a church is a turn-off.

The Danish philosopher Kirkegaard once quipped that whereas Jesus had turned water into wine, the church had managed to turn the wine into water. Sadly, that is true of some churches.

However, just as you don't write off the institution of the family because some families are dreadful – neither can you write off the Christian church because some churches have failed to live up to God's intention.

The fact is that God doesn't want us to be a bunch of loners.

Commitment to Jesus inevitably involves commitment to his church.

That was true on the Day of Pentecost: **“About 3000 people were added to the group that day”** (v41). And from then on **“They spent their times in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers”** (2.42)

In his baptism Matthew will be identifying himself not just with Jesus, but with the family of Jesus. To use the jargon, he will be baptised into the body of Christ.

Church membership is part of the Christian package.

As a result at our next communion service we will be formally welcoming him into the membership of this local church.

I am sure he will never regret taking that step of response by joining the church – because for all its warts, the church has lot going for it – its great to be part of God's family.

So, let me recap: on that first Pentecost Sunday 3000 people turned away from their sins, they were baptised, they received the Spirit, and they joined the church.

What was true of them, will be true of Matthew this morning.
And that is what God wants of us all.

- Jesus died for us that we might be forgiven
- Jesus rose victorious over death, so that we might have life
- God wants to give you his Spirit so that we may know his strengthening presence day by day
- God wants to welcome us into his church, so that we might experience the joy of being part of his family.

What are you going to do about this? What will be your response?