

## **“PENTECOST SUNDAY”**

### *Acts 2:1-41*

Well, as has already been made very clear, today is Pentecost Sunday – the birthday of the Church, when the original group of fearful, beleaguered followers of Jesus who were anxiously hiding out in Jerusalem, were suddenly galvanised into men and women who would change the world. And what we are doing here this morning, although lacking the surprise and originality of that first occasion, is something that has been repeated countless times down through the centuries since then – not just on the Day of Pentecost, but throughout the year in all kinds of different churches and settings.

We’ve just heard in those words written by Luke, as he tried to commit to papyrus the story of the foundations of the Christian Church, how Peter and his fellow disciples had been totally transformed by Jesus and by his Spirit gushing into their lives. He stood up in front of that crowd of festival goers and told them about Jesus and his significance for everyone who was there. The transformation of his life and the passion with which he communicated it showed just how desperate he was to tell others that Jesus is Lord – he’s the One who make the difference, the One who really matters, the top priority.

We didn’t read all of the sermon he preached – you can look through that later, if you’re interested – but what he said deeply affected the crowd who were listening. As Luke says here they were “*cut to the heart*”. They realise that they really need to be in on the action and ask, “*What shall we do?*”. And what Peter replied still holds good today – and it’s what we’re about here this morning. If you want to respond to Jesus, then here’s the plan.

#### 1. **REPENT**

There’s a good, old-fashioned, religious word! Of course, it wasn’t an old-fashioned word then, nor was it particularly religious. The Greek word Peter used – part of the word *metanoia* – meant to turn around, to change direction, to leave the past behind and move forward. One of my favourite uses of it was when the historian Josephus, an aristocratic Jew who was trying to come to some kind of agreement with the Romans, went to negotiate with a Jewish terrorist, and the way the word is used in that situation really means, “*Give up your own agenda*”.

That’s what Peter is saying here – “*Give up your own agenda*”. Recognise that Jesus is Lord: he knows best. You know that the way you’ve been living your life – your agenda – hasn’t always been a huge success. There are things you regret, things you wish you’d done differently, decisions you’ve come to, choices you’ve made that have made life more difficult for you, that have affected and hurt others.

Sometimes it takes a bit of humility to realise that, but it means you've got to a point where you realise you need help – just like Peter's audience on that first Day of Pentecost.

Your own agenda hasn't worked out as you'd hoped and you're having to live with the consequences of that – and you will have to live with that for eternity. Jesus offers the opportunity to give that up, to leave the past behind and to move forward with him. That's very much a part of what Tracy is doing here this morning as she is baptised. Repent.

## 2. **BE BAPTISED**

But Peter doesn't leave it there. Repenting like this would be a life-changing moment. But it needs marking in some way. It needs a seal putting on it. So he invites these people to be baptised. For most of these people, that would have been a difficult step to take in many ways – humiliating, almost. For them, baptism was for those who were joining God's people from other religious backgrounds – proselytes. The Jewish people thought they were already in and safe, so being baptised was an acknowledgement that they might have got even that wrong.

But above all else, this was an act of commitment, a way of witnessing to what they now believed: that Jesus is Lord and their own agendas were being put aside. It was a visible sign. Firstly it was a **sign to themselves**. It was a way of making real to themselves that they were making a new start and something that they could look back on in years to come and use as a reminder of what had happened. I remember talking to an old Jamaican man in the church where I used to work. He was struggling with his faith and various other issues, but he said, "Whenever I get really down, I look back to that day in Kingston when I was baptised and I know that Jesus was with me then and he'll be with me now."

Secondly, it was a **sign to others**. It was a way of standing up before other people and saying, "This is where I'm going now", a form of testimony, if you like. That's why this morning's baptism isn't taking place in Tracy's bathroom with no-one else there. It's happening here in front of a couple of hundred people to whom she is saying, "This is for real!" Doing something as apparently daft as this isn't easy. It clearly marks a real turning point in someone's life that is significant and – to use a current jargon word – intentional.

And thirdly, it was a **sign to Jesus**. It was a way of expressing commitment to Jesus himself, to recognising his Lordship and sealing that act of repentance. The person being baptised was – is – sealing the decision to start off in a new direction. All that was wrong with the past was gone and a new life was

now possible. It was – is – a declaration that they wanted the future to be different and that they would now be moving forward with a new agenda and a powerful sense of forgiveness for anything that had been wrong in the past. And it was all to be “*in the name of Jesus*”, with the seal and blessing of Jesus himself. But that wasn’t going to be easy, so there’s a third strand to this response.

### 3. **RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

Peter and the other disciples had just received this rather odd and amazing gift. The Spirit of Jesus was somehow made available to them – and look at the difference it had made. When the people who responded to Peter’s sermon started out on this new pathway and witnessed to it through their baptism, they were also granted the inner help of Jesus’ Holy Spirit. Just as the baptism was an outward confirmation of their desire to walk the way of Jesus with the past put behind them, so the gift of the Holy Spirit was a kind of inner witness to each new believer that they were part of the company of Jesus’ followers. The baptism was, if you like, the outward, objective witness and the Holy Spirit was the inner, experiential witness.

Unfortunately, over the years, we’ve split all this up. People decide to follow Jesus and we have moved baptism away from that – either to the beginning of life, as in infant baptism, or after a bit of thinking time and a course of baptism classes, as in our tradition. Then we’re not quite sure what to do with the Holy Spirit bit, so we have all kinds of odd ideas then about “baptism in the Spirit” and “second blessings” and so on. I don’t think there’s any doubt in the minds of the writers of the New Testament that when you take that decision to follow Jesus, you also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. But I like to think there might be a sense in which that is reiterated or confirmed at your baptism.

Whatever the case, all those who decide to follow Jesus receive the gift of the Holy Spirit which is the sign of a transformed life, a sign that you’ve been with Jesus (*Acts 4:13*). It’s a means of God’s helping you every day and equipping you to serve him on the frontline where you find yourself at work, at school, in your family, down the gym, in the pub, in the shops – wherever.

And notice that Peter refers to all this as “*the promise*”. This is God’s promise to you. Take him seriously and he will make a serious difference in your life. I believe that promise is as valid today as it was on that first Day of Pentecost – you can have it now. Maybe you’re at that stage this morning where you want a new start. Maybe you would like to live a transformed life, a life that is different from the one you’ve been struggling with up until now. Maybe you feel you need the help of God’s Holy Spirit to live as God wants – perhaps even a fresh awareness of that Holy Spirit. The invitation is still open.

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**A sign to themselves.** It was a way of making real to themselves that they were making a new start and something that they could look back on in years to come.

**A sign to others.** It was a way of standing up before other people and saying, "This is where I'm going now", a form of testimony. It clearly marks a real turning point in someone's life that is significant and intentional.

**A sign to Jesus.** It was a way of expressing commitment to Jesus himself, to recognising his Lordship and sealing that act of repentance. And it was all to be "*in the name of Jesus*", with the seal and blessing of Jesus himself.

### **3. RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

Those who started out on this new pathway and witnessed to it through their baptism, were also granted the inner help of Jesus' Holy Spirit. Just as the baptism was an outward confirmation of their desire to walk the way of Jesus with the past put behind them, so the gift of the Holy Spirit was a kind of inner witness to each new believer that they were one of Jesus' followers. The baptism was, if you like, the outward, objective witness and the Holy Spirit was the inner, experiential witness.

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. Try to sum up the main point of Peter's sermon (*vv14-36*) in one sentence.
2. What do you understand by the word "repent"? Is it a one-off response?
3. What is so significant about baptism for you? Can you be a Christian without it? Does it make you a Christian?
4. Do you agree that we have split up three things that should really be one (repentance, baptism, gift of the Holy Spirit)? Why/why not?
5. What do you understand by "the gift of the Holy Spirit"? What's the point of it?