

Acts 2:22-32

This morning we look at the first Christian sermon that was ever preached. It's 9 o'clock in the morning. Something bizarre has just taken place. Tongues of fire and a mighty wind, and a community becoming instantly multi-lingual in spontaneous praise! Whether you are part of what is happening here, or whether you are an innocent by-stander – how do you make sense of what happened when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost?

The sermon that is reported in this morning's reading, arises from the confusion that ensued! From those who simply saw God at work, to those who were simply amused by the inebriated behaviour of others. And I wonder what would be a 'Bloomsbury' response to this kind of event! Would we just cross the street, assume that we had inadvertently strayed dangerously close to the Dominion Theatre and say it's not very Bloomsbury? Would we be attracted or repulsed? Would we be curious, or dismissive?

On coming into London on Sunday morning at nine o'clock, this kind of scenario is not difficult to picture. There are clubs hired out by Christian fellowships and attended largely by young trendy people – which are active at 9am on Sundays. Equally, there are clubs whose inhabitants have been drinking and dancing all night, and emerge into the streets looking comically rough and wobbly! And for many, it is not difficult to imagine confusing the two!

Now, before going any further – it is worth noticing that the scope for confusion here means that sometimes, when God is being worthily enthroned on the praises of Israel, it looks messy, and undignified, and disrespectful. A long way from what real worship should be. I wonder if for many of us, we would witness this event negatively! If so, then we must hear the sermon that Peter preached as an attempt to open our eyes to the activity of God:

A New Era of History has Begun

For the first Christian sermon ever preached, it is obvious that Saint Peter had not been to Spurgeon's college. Where are the three points all beginning with the same letter? Where is the moral application? Why are the congregation at liberty to join in? But, he did make good use of biblical texts, he was topical, the resurrection was central. And of the great evangelistic speeches reported in the book of Acts, there is a definite pattern that seems to be followed: time is fulfilled; the Kingdom of God is being revealed under your noses; repent – and believe this good news. Although Peter needed some congregational assistance to get to that final point! He didn't tell his congregation what to do – until they shouted out loud and asked him!

The first text he uses is the prophet Joel, who declared that in the last days, God's Spirit will be poured out on all flesh. Meaning, not only Jews – but everyone. And if I was there – at a biblical preaching event where it was clearly acceptable to shout questions out – if I was there, I would have asked how an exclusively Jewish event such as Pentecost, can signify God's spirit being poured out on all flesh. Sure, it was poured out on Jews who were living all over the world, but that is not quite the same thing. I would love to see what was going on inside Peter's head: because it's another eight chapters before Peter accepts that the good news of Jesus Christ is also for people who are not Jewish. Peter had clearly not been to a Baptist College, where we are taught the five core values, one of which is 'inclusivity'!

The real point of Peter using the text of Joel, it seems, is the claim to have entered the so-called 'last days'. Now, there is all sorts of talk around at the moment about the last days. Inside the church, since I became a Christian twenty years ago, I have been told that we are living the last days. A generation of unchurched people in the West is largely characterised by a belief that we are in the last days of planet earth.

I know property developers of my generation, already planning to buy their ideal property with lots of land to be self-sustaining, and to protect it with high fences and gun towers. And these are serious plans made by intelligent people from generation X.

In the year that generation X began also saw the birth of so-called Gaia theory. This is the theory, conceived by the environmentalist James Lovelock, that the earth is a living organism, that spits out unworthy inhabitants. According to James Lovelock, by 2040, the world population of more than six billion will have been culled by floods, drought and famine. The people of Southern Europe, as well as South-East Asia, will be fighting their way into countries such as Canada, Australia and Britain.

He says that *"By 2040, parts of the Sahara desert will have moved into middle Europe. We are talking about Paris - as far north as Berlin. In Britain we will escape because of our oceanic position."* Lovelock believes it is too late to repair the damage. *"If you take the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predictions, then by 2040 every summer in Europe will be as hot as it was in 2003 - between 110F and 120F. It is not the death of people that is the main problem, it is the fact that the plants can't grow - there will be almost no food grown in Europe. We are about to take an evolutionary step and my hope is that the species will emerge stronger. It would be hubris to think humans as they now are God's chosen race."*

In the last century, the world became mortal – with the advent of nuclear technology. The scope to destroy life on earth came into human hands. It is now only a matter of time before somebody flicks a switch or presses a button. Again, we are in the last days.

But however, or whenever the world comes to an end – we are in the last days, but we have been in them for two thousand years. What Joel had foreseen and what Peter has proclaimed, is that we live in an a new era. We live in an age where God's holy Spirit is pleased to inhabit all people. The era of the church, the era of the Spirit – these are the last days. Whether we live in the last last days remains to be seen. The point of the Joel text is that a new era is coming, and Peter is using it to say that an expectation is being fulfilled:

For the last couple of months, Stefan has been wondering round either asking people, or telling them, 'is it my birthday tomorrow', 'It is my birthday tomorrow!' It's my birthday tomorrow! Well, now that we are actually at the 30th of March, it is actually his birthday tomorrow – and if he hasn't told you in person before you leave church this morning, then you have done well.

Peter is using the text to say that a long-awaited time has arrived. The coming of God's kingdom did not mean the end of the space-time continuum. It meant that a new era of history has begun – the last days, in which the whole world is invited to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Those who worship God in these last days, worship him in the Spirit – and in the Spirit find their radical unity. Of course, this week this city has seen an international gathering, communing not in worship, but in the baggage lounge of Heathrow's terminal 5. Although, probably not unity in praise.

So then Peter moves to his second text, Psalm 16 which we read together. It is a text that written by Israel's most revered political leader. The wide belief was that in the new age, it would be a descendant of David that becomes the great leader of Israel. So Peter explains how all that had happened to Jesus had been foretold by the most revered political leader in Israel's history. And the particular focus is the resurrection:

“You will not abandon me to the grave – nor will you let your holy one see decay.” Jesus of course, had not been abandoned to the grave, nor would his body decay. And it seems to me that, particularly in an era as uncertain as ours, when the sun may well be turned to darkness and the moon to blood. When there will be blood and fire and billows of smoke.” And in this world of doom and gloom, we worship a resurrected Christ! Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved:

And for those who worship this resurrected Christ, the prophecy of David becomes true of us: *“You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your holy one see decay.”*

For those who:

- 1: Eco break down – doom and gloom merchants
- 2: Not being heard is the same as being dead
- 3: Facing death at close hand – many of the distractions that drive us and shape us and concern us evaporate.

Hardship prior to vindication – sun turned black / coming of Lord
Personal and Corporate