

Dear Friends

Many of you will know that I had planned my sabbatical leave for the coming quarter. Due to staff shortages, the circuit leadership team have asked me to postpone this to a future occasion. I had plenty of wonderful visiting preachers ready to cover for me and I hope that you will be blessed by their ministry. However, the good news is that I will be able to continue the Bible studies on Matthew's Gospel. These are such good occasions. I hope you will be able to come.

This year the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Easter Day, falls on 9 June. In Israel, Pentecost was a celebration of the grain harvest. The Bible's account of the first Christian Pentecost begins, 'When the day of Pentecost came they were all together in one place' (Acts 2:1). I think there is something important in that – 'they were all together'. John's Gospel reminds us that when Jesus appeared on the evening of the first Easter Day, Thomas was not with the disciples (John 20:24). The risen Lord Jesus graciously appeared to the disciples again a week later when Thomas was with them, causing Thomas to exclaim, 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:28). It is a reminder that it is really important for the people of God to gather together. As the disciples were together, suddenly the Holy Spirit came. The Spirit's presence and power caused both Spirit-filled worship, 'they began to speak in other tongues' (Acts 2:4) and Spirit-filled preaching, 'we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!' (Acts 2:11).

Much of the book of Acts is devoted to what the Apostles said. From careful reading of these speeches, we can see the essential Apostolic message included six basic statements that are as important for Christian preaching and witness today as they were on the day of Pentecost. Every Christian can gain great benefit from memorising this list:

1. Jesus is the promised Saviour
2. The death of Jesus was part of God's plan
3. God raised Jesus as he promised
4. The resurrection of Jesus was witnessed and proved
5. Jesus is glorified now and for ever
6. All must repent and believe

At the heart of the Christian message is the claim that Jesus is the promised Saviour. Perhaps people today are unfamiliar with God's promises and not so sure about their need to be saved. Nevertheless, most people realise that the world is full of evil and that people die. The Christian message of forgiveness and life through our Saviour, Jesus Christ, is always relevant.

While there are people who will say that Jesus was a great teacher, maybe even a miracle worker, or a heroic leader, the Gospels are clear about identity of Jesus and the reason for his death. Jesus is uniquely the Son of God and he died to save his people from their sins. Jesus died on the cross as an offering and a sacrifice that enabled our forgiveness. It was part of God's plan that Jesus should die for his people.

If forgiveness brings hope for this life, the resurrection of Jesus (his being raised by God from death to die no more) brings hope for a life to come, a resurrection life with Jesus. On the day of Pentecost, Peter was able to point to the tomb of ancient Israel's great King, David. David died and was buried and after many generations his tomb was still evidence for that. But Jesus died, was buried and rose again.

Unlike King David's tomb, the tomb of Jesus was empty. The women friends of Jesus and the disciples discovered that on the morning of the first Easter Day. But an empty tomb might only suggest the

removal of the body. It was Jesus appearing to the disciples, talking with them, walking with them, even eating with them and allowing them to touch him that, together with the empty tomb, was proof that Jesus was alive.

In the morning, I like to listen to the radio. Although BBC radio was traditionally broadcast from London much of it now comes from Salford near Manchester. Between the broadcaster's microphone and the radio in my house (250 miles), where does the sound go? The simple answer is that it goes into another dimension that is real even though we cannot go there. Does that help when we think of heaven? Heaven is not so much above the sky (though we can understand why people before the Space Age expressed it like that) but it is another dimension. We cannot go there yet but at his Ascension, Jesus returned there and is glorified – all the hosts of heaven worship him forever.

The gospel message also brings a challenge. Our lives are not meant to be the same as they were, because of Jesus. The message of Pentecost is that all must repent and believe. Repentance doesn't simply mean to be sorry for what is wrong in our lives, though that is part of it. It is about a new way of thinking that results in a new way of speaking and a new way of acting. It is to think, speak and live the Jesus way. We are not able to do this by trying hard but by believing him, giving our lives to him and asking that he fill us with his Holy Spirit – our own personal Pentecost.

God bless

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