

Preaching with Power

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Preacher: Rod McArdle

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 8th of May 2005. The preacher is Rod McArdle.

His sermon is entitled Preaching with Power and is based on Acts chapter 2 verses 22 to 36. I've been to that city, I'm sure you'll remember the very large city square. As I approached this square, it was a Saturday afternoon, I noticed a faithful soul, he was standing on a two-step ladder, Bible in hand, and he was calling the people of Christ's church to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

There was commotion all around the preacher and prancing around the preacher was a woman and a man and they were both maybe in their mid to late 20s.

They were screaming abuse, they were swearing, yelling blasphemies. In fact, they were seeking to outdo each other. Interestingly, they weren't so much screaming at the preacher as at Jesus.

[1 : 12] And the woman was walking up and down, she was waving her arms and she was yelling, Jesus is not God. Jesus is not God. And the man, well, he'd alternate.

Firstly, he depicted Jesus as a Nazi soldier with all of the hand signs, returning to judge the world with a rod of iron. And then he would proclaim that Jesus was really just a poor little Jewish boy who died a shabby death because he hadn't been good to his father and mother.

This scene was one of absolute rage, hostility and satanic opposition. No human actions or interventions will change cold, hard hearts.

We need to beseech the almighty living God to open the eyes of the spiritually blind. And if hearts are to be changed, then our proclamation of the gospel must be with power.

Not with our power, but with the power of the Holy Spirit. In the dusty city of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, there'd also been intense crowd hostility to the person of Jesus Christ.

[2 : 28] In fact, the crowd had screamed that Jesus be murdered, crucified on a Roman cross. And now, some 50 days later on, here was another huge crowd.

They were gathered from many countries for the Feast of Pentecost. What a tremendous opportunity this presented for Jesus' followers to declare Jesus' triumph.

His triumph that he had risen from the dead. How were the disciples going to respond? Would they be bold? Would they be fearless?

I mean, the disciples had been anything but bold, hadn't they, at the time of the trials of Jesus and then at the scene of the cross. But remember, the resurrected Jesus had told them immediately prior to his ascension that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.

And now, the day has come, the Feast of Pentecost. And it was on this day that the Spirit came upon the believers. There was the sound like a violent wind.

[3 : 37] There were tongues like fire resting on each believer. And the believers expressed their baptism in the Spirit by praising God in this great range, this great variety of languages.

Some in the crowd, of course, thought that the followers of Jesus were drunk. And Jesus connects with the crowd by answering the question and that accusation. He says to them, we're not drunk.

It's only nine in the morning.

And Peter goes on and he tells them that the real reason for this surprising phenomena that the crowd has just witnessed is the fact that the prophecy of the Old Testament prophet, Joel, is actually being fulfilled in their presence before them.

Peter is preaching with great power. He's preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter, the one who denied the Lord three times. Peter, the one who was restored by Jesus on that shoreline of the Sea of Galilee.

Peter, the follower of Jesus, filled with the Spirit, preaching with power, preaching with boldness, preaching with fearlessness.

[4 : 53] And Peter begins his proclamation of the Gospel in verse 22. Let me encourage you to have your Bibles open on page 885 and just follow as we work through the passage. He begins with reference to the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth because that was the name by which Jesus was known to the crowd.

You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders and signs that God did through him among you. Many, many in this crowd had been witnesses of Jesus' miracles, of his wonders, of his signs. And Peter emphasises that they know this. He says, as you yourselves know. And the source of Jesus' power, of course, was God. The Jews had in fact accused Jesus of working miracles by the power of Satan. But there was more to God's purpose for Jesus than the working of miracles.

The death of Jesus is declared in verse 23 to be according to the definite plan and the foreknowledge of God. Do you remember that Peter, in his declaration at Caesarea Philippi, he says that, Jesus, you are the Messiah, the son of the living God.

[6 : 14] Jesus then went on in Matthew 16 and told his disciples that he'd have to go to Jerusalem and there he'd be killed and then he would rise on the third day. The fact that the death of Jesus was integral to God's plan was furthest from Peter's mind at that time.

You might recall that Peter exclaimed to Jesus, God forbid it, Lord. And Jesus rebuked him. Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me. You are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.

Ah yes, there was much that that quick to the draw Peter had to learn. But learn he did. And now, now here he is, empowered and filled by the Holy Spirit.

He says to them, You that are Israelites, this man, Jesus of Nazareth, was handed over to you according to the definite plan and the foreknowledge of God. The gospel accounts often report that Jesus' death was according to God's plan.

And in fact, as you go through the book of Acts, you'll see that the apostles, they don't shirk that very fact. The cross was pre-planned by God. But Peter declares more than just God's sovereignty.

[7 : 39] He proclaims with Holy Spirit boldness, you crucified and you killed Jesus of Nazareth by the hands of those outside the law. And so the crowd at the trial of Jesus clearly believed that they'd be better off and more secure if Jesus was out of their world.

One writer has said, The crowd opened the door of death, they pushed Jesus out through it, and they slammed the door behind him. However, when you think about verse 23, maybe you ask, How can God foreordain the death of Jesus and yet still hold the killers of Jesus absolutely responsible? I want to suggest that's an obvious example of a much broader issue. How can God be totally sovereign and yet hold us, his creatures, totally responsible for our actions?

I mean, there appears to be an incompatibility, doesn't there, between those two apparent truths.

You might think of that as a paradox. The word that you might use at a biblical trivia night is maybe antinomy, which probably expresses that better.

But the word to describe it's not important. There appears to be a contradiction. When we think about God's sovereignty and when we think about our responsibility, what we're really asking about is, what does God do as the king and what he does as the judge?

[9 : 21] Verse 23, I think, is a classic verse because they're both God's sovereignty and our responsibility are taught side by side.

Both are guaranteed by the same divine authority. Therefore, they're both equally true. Let me encourage you not to try and play one off against the other.

God's sovereignty is a reality and our responsibility is a reality. Now, that might seem inexplicable to us, but we shouldn't be surprised when we come across such mysteries in God's word.

I mean, God is God. And if we could understand God completely, then we'd have a God in our own image, in man's image.

Well, Peter just simply puts these two truths out there to the crowd and then he says, but. But what?

[10 : 23] Verse 24, but God raised him up, having freed him from death because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. Peter gives his greatest focus in this sermon to the resurrection of Jesus.

The various sermons that we see recorded in Acts, I think, serve as useful reminders to us of the importance of preaching the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

I've often found in personal evangelism that it's the subject of the resurrection that really grabs the attention of the person that I'm speaking to. Notice what Peter proclaims.

God raised Jesus up. That is, the resurrection was an act of God. Freeing him from death. The crowd back at Jesus' trial had concluded that Barabbas would serve their interests much better than Jesus would.

And they pushed Jesus out through the door of death. But God raised him up. It wasn't as if God brought Jesus back through the door.

[11 : 37] Rather, in the case of Jesus, God abolished the door. I wonder if you've been with someone when the door of death has slammed shut.

If you have, like I have, then I suspect that experience is well and truly etched into your memory.

Death, of course, at one level, is the most natural thing to happen in a fallen, sin-infested, decaying world.

And yet, something seems to rise up inside us when we're confronted by death. How could this be? I mean, is this really the end?

Is this all that life's about, just simply to end up as a cold, stiff corpse? It's any wonder, isn't it, that the writer to the Hebrews says that people without faith in Jesus Christ are held in slavery.

Slavery by the fear of death. Over the summer that's just been, I talked with a young university student. He told me that his life goal was to be a pure atheist.

[12 : 52] When I asked him to explain what he meant by that, he said, Rod, you're a Christian. Because you're a Christian, you must have a hope beyond death. I suppose that means if you're a Christian that you're not afraid of dying.

I agreed with him and he went on and he said, but I'm not a Christian. Death is a big deal to me. It bothers me. So, think through his logic, because I don't believe in God, I want to be an atheist who's not bothered by death.

That's what I mean by trying to become a pure atheist. He went on and said, and there's not many of us. I agreed with him with great feeling.

I'm also reminded of a work colleague from my previous corporate life who was strongly opposed to the gospel. I can still see clear in my mind this day as he returned from a funeral, looking a little ashen.

As I greeted him, he said, wow, that's the door that you don't want to go through. There's no coming back. Outside of Jesus Christ, the reality is death is a fearful thing.

[14 : 09] I want to encourage us not to believe that typical Aussie bravado, when you're dead, you're dead. Peter has already reminded the crowd back in verse 20 that we looked at two Sunday nights ago.

He's reminded of the reality of the day of the Lord. And the apostles, it didn't matter whether they were addressing the Jews or the Gentiles as you go through Acts, they never shrink back from declaring God's final judgment.

So having just plainly told the crowd that they'd killed Jesus, Peter declares the glorious news. But God raised him from the dead.

It was impossible for Jesus to be held by its power. And that is simply a fantastic truth. This is powerful preaching by Peter.

This is powerful preaching, preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit. This crowd had refused the message of the previous mighty acts, the miracles of Jesus.

[15 : 15] And now they're confronted with the mightiest act of all. And its message was the gospel indeed. Paul, sometime later in writing to Timothy, says Christ Jesus abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

The simple fact is the resurrection of Jesus Christ altered the face of the universe. And each of us, by God's grace, can have that total confidence in the future of being in the presence of the Lord himself in a glorified, resurrected body just like the Lord Jesus.

We can be if we have our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter, of course, is preaching to a crowd of Jews, a crowd of Jews who knew their scriptures, what we know of as the Old Testament.

He's already quoted from Joel 2 in the section just prior to tonight's reading. And now he quotes from the last four verses of Psalm 16. Now, when the psalm was first written, the psalm was the

prayer of a godly man expressing his confidence that God would not abandon him to the grave. And Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he interprets the psalm messianically. That is, he interprets it as applying to Jesus the Messiah.

[16:51] And in verse 29, Peter tells the crowd the facts that they well knew. David the psalmist, he didn't rise from the dead. David the psalmist is prophesying that Jesus would not remain in the grave.

And so by the time that Peter gets to the part of his sermon that we have recorded in verse 32, he's been powerfully building a compelling argument before this crowd.

This Jesus God raised up. And of that, all of us are witnesses. Scripture attests to the resurrection of the Messiah.

And he says that we, the followers of Jesus, we're all witnesses of that stunning fact. But of course, the story of Jesus of Nazareth doesn't just end with his resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus and then his ascension and his exaltation to the right hand of the Father, they're actually held in close association with each other, as if they nearly constituted a single event.

[17:57] And in verse 32 and verse 33, we read, this Jesus God raised up, being therefore exalted at the right hand of God. So Peter gives the gathered crowd evidence that Jesus is in fact exalted.

Look at the way he goes about it. Firstly, he tells them, the Father has given Jesus the promised Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit has been poured out into the followers of Jesus.

The crowd were witnesses of this stunning fact. They'd seen it and they'd heard it. And secondly, he reminds them that scripture itself attests to Jesus' resurrection in his exposition of Psalm 16.

And scripture also attests to Christ being exalted to the right hand. He also goes back into the Old Testament and picks up Psalm 110. Psalm 110 verse 1, The Lord or Yahweh says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

So this is another Psalm of David. And Peter gets the crowd to focus on the most obvious. David didn't ascend into the heavens. David is not speaking about himself.

[19:21] This is God the Father speaking to Jesus, Jesus who is David's Lord. Well, raises a question, doesn't it?

What's Jesus doing in this exalted state? Well, he is at the right hand of the Father. This is the position of supreme honour and absolute authority and power.

And Jesus is bringing to pass the complete defeat of all of his enemies. It's worth reflecting in a world of great evil that it was never part of God's plan that his son would immediately stamp out evil when he was exalted.

But evil is being dealt with by Jesus Christ and it will have been completely dealt with at his second coming. We live in this interval of time between the death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus and his second coming.

We need to keep that perspective when we're troubled by what's happening in the world. Well, Peter's preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit and he's bringing his sermon to a conclusion.

[20:36] Perhaps if we'd been in the crowd that day and we were still trying to work out who is this person, Jesus of Nazareth, then Peter's conclusion, I think, really, if you like, nails everything right on the head.

Because he goes on in verse 36. Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him, that is, Jesus of Nazareth, both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.

Look at Peter's first stated fact. Jesus is Lord. Of course, it had taken the disciples themselves quite a while to really understand who Jesus is.

But with the resurrection, with the exaltation of Jesus, the disciples proclaim him as Lord. In fact, the disciples used the term Lord to describe both God and Jesus.

And you can see that just a few verses later in verse 39. So Jesus' deity is clearly proclaimed to this crowd. Boldly, fearlessly.

[21:53] But it's not done with human courage. It's done in the power of the Holy Spirit. In verse 21, we saw last, two weeks ago, that Jesus is the object of faith.

In verse 33 tonight, Jesus is the one who's poured out the Holy Spirit. And in verse 36, Jesus is the sovereign king. Every rebellious power in the whole cosmos is being brought under his control.

But Jesus is also the Christ. He's the Messiah. He's the anointed one. Israel, of course, had hoped for a political deliverer. But the early church understood that the deliverance that the Messiah brought was primarily a deliverance from sin and sin's effects.

That's Peter's sermon. And it raises the question, well then, what about us? What should we learn from this great example of powerful preaching? I want to suggest just a couple of points in closing. Firstly, I want to suggest that this brings to us clearly the absolute necessity of the power of the Holy Spirit in our ministry. John 14, verse 12, Jesus says this, very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and in fact will do greater works than these because I'm going to the Father.

[23 : 26] And that reference to the greater works is a reference to the spread of the gospel and the promises to the one who believes in me. So this promise comes all the way down through the centuries and it comes down through the centuries to us this very night.

It's Jesus who continues his ministry. He continues his ministry through us and by the presence and the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Well, if we're going to expect the Holy Spirit's enablement, then we simply have to have a commonality with the Spirit's purpose.

And what's the Spirit's purpose? To glorify Jesus Christ through the scriptures. When that's our message, we can minister in confidence.

We can minister in confidence that God's purposes will advance, that cold hearts will be awakened, that people will indeed come to know and love the Lord Jesus.

[24 : 32] And if we were to trace the apostles' ministry through Acts, as we're going to read the book in our 24-hour prayer vigil, you'd see three principles that converge as you read through the great book.

The divine message, Jesus Christ. The divine method. Authoritative proclamation. That's not always standing up on a box.

It's not always addressing a big crowd. But it's authoritative proclamation in all of our interactions of sharing the gospel. And often that's going to be one-on-one with our friends, our work colleagues, our neighbours, our relatives.

The divine message, Jesus Christ. The divine method. Authoritative proclamation. And the divine means. The power of the Spirit of God.

As I was reflecting on this passage this week, it struck me, I guess, that in the modern church, there are so many well-publicised, unbiblical excesses that are conducted in the name of the Holy Spirit.

[25 : 39] And I, for one, am tempted because of that to overly correct too much. I wonder if you face that same temptation. But if we are followers of Jesus Christ, we can't lose sight of the magnificence of the person of the Holy Spirit and the absolute indispensability of the Holy Spirit in ministry.

That's the first point. Secondly, we need a proclamation that connects with those that we're speaking to, we're proclaiming to. Every time we see a sermon or a small sermon in Acts, a skimmed down sermon, we see that the apostles connect with their hearers.

When they're preaching to the Jews, they go back into some significant exposition of the Old Testament. They don't do that when they're approaching pagan Gentiles. There they, if you like, spread out the big plans of God's dealing with mankind.

But in all cases, the gospel is proclaimed. Sin is put on the table, the certainty of God's judgment is proclaimed.

They're not avoided because they're two difficult topics. And the need for repentance is stressed again and again. In fact, one day as I sat down and just read the book of Acts straight through, the two R words that struck me again and again were repentance and resurrection in the proclamation of the apostles.

[27 : 16] So our proclamation needs to connect with the particular groups that we are interacting with. Thirdly, we do need to proclaim God's sovereignty.

And clearly, the pressures of the world that we live in, a world that's very pluralistic, they will always dim us down or seek to dim us down. They'll weigh against us making a clear proclamation of Christ's sovereignty.

But we do need to proclaim his sovereignty and as importantly, we need to live out his sovereignty in our daily lives. Fourthly, I think it's pretty clear that the apostles call a spade a spade.

They make no attempt to cover up sin or guilt. I mean, to this crowd in verse 23 and verse 36, they are absolutely clear you crucified this man, Jesus of Nazareth.

And they're responsible for that. And the people, of course, just after this passage that we've read tonight, they respond and they say, well, what should we do? And if that's your question tonight, then the answer is exactly the same.

[28 : 27] Repent and trust in Jesus as your Saviour and Lord. And then finally, as Christians, we should live our days with continual excitement and great joy.

great joy that we worship and we serve the risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ. He is exalted. The King is exalted on high.

As I pray for us, the band are going to come up. Dear Heavenly Father, we praise your holy name that the ministry of Jesus continues.

and Lord, wonder of wonders, that ministry continues through us, your children with all of our flaws, sinners, but regenerated.

The ministry continues through us, Lord, in the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. Lord, I pray that we would have a boldness, that we would have a fearlessness in proclaiming the glorious good news of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[29 : 36] Lord Jesus, we thank you that you came, that you took our punishment on the cross, that you died for our sin, that you rose from the dead as that all-time declaration that you are indeed in God, that you ascended and that you are sitting in that place of absolute honour, absolute power and authority at the right hand of the Father.

Father, so Father, we proclaim tonight that Jesus is exalted. The King is exalted on high. We will praise him. He is exalted, forever exalted and we will praise his name.

Amen.