

The Gentle Pentecost

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- [0 : 0 0] Amen. Today is Mother's Day and I guess it's a day on which mere males should with some envy and great respect look at the mothers of our land.
- Thank God for the tremendous gift that it is to be a mother. It will be a continuing source of joy to those who are in that particular station in life.
- Arrest as you may be at any given moment, but aware of the gift that is yours, any child or children you've been given. We're looking this morning in the scriptures at the last verses of chapter 10 of the Acts of the Apostles.
- And this is found in your Blue Pew Bible and I'd like you to turn to it on page 123 of the New Testament section. And to sort of give a slight, probably a prolonged introduction to this story, if you were cruising in the eastern Mediterranean, you could see from far out at sea, a great white temple would be a landmark on the west coast of Judea some 2,000 years ago.
- And that great white building was a temple built by Herod the Great to honor Caesar Augustus.
- [2 : 2 9] He, in fact, built not only the temple, but the whole city that surrounded it. And they built as well a huge harbor, man-made, because there is no natural harbor from Tel Aviv or Joppa, which was the seaport to Jerusalem, right down into Egypt, except for this man-made harbor, which was Caesarea.
- And Caesarea was a very important time in the 10th chapter of Acts, because it was the center of Roman authority in the Roman province of Judea, and that's where all the bureaucrats were.
- It was in relationship to Jerusalem, like Ottawa is to Toronto, and probably some of the same sentiments were shared between them.
- Because this is where all the soldiers were, where all the bureaucrats were, where all the leaders of government had their residence, and they carried on their social life in the Roman manner, unrestricted and uninhibited by the Jews, who were such a constant source of annoyance to them in Jerusalem.
- Here they had their horse races, and here they had their amphitheaters, and here they had their splendid social occasions, and here the emperor was in residence, and here Pontius Pilate, the governor, had his residence.
- [4 : 1 0] And this was the sort of port of entry for all the Roman authorities, government officials, and soldiers that were coming into Judea.
- And living there as a centurion in the Italian van, which was a thousand men, and he was in charge of a hundred of them, was a strange and wonderful New Testament character called Cornelius.
- Now Cornelius had, in some strange and perverse way of the grace of God, found himself among the Jews and worshipping with them.
- They called him a God-hearer, and he would join himself to the company of the synagogue, even though he was uncircumcised and a Gentile foreigner.

He may not have been very attracted to the Jews, but he was very attracted to the God of the Jews. And so it came that he was given by God a vision.

[5 : 23] And in his vision, he saw a man coming to him and explaining something to him that he badly needed to know. Now up the coast, about where modern-day Tel Aviv is, was another natural seaport which was called Jaffa.

And in the outskirts of Jaffa lived one, Simon the Tanner. Now if any of you have ever been to a tannery, you will know why he lived on the outskirts.

Because it's a very smelly business to be involved in. And living with Simon the Tanner was a visitor whose name was Peter.

And Peter was up on the housetop, and apparently till this very day, for the benefit of tourists, there's a little place to mark such a housetop.

Whether it's true or not doesn't matter, but as a tourist attraction, it has some appeal, I'm sure. And it was there that Peter was waiting for supper, and he dreamed.

[6 : 41] Now I, again, if you're living in the house of Simon the Tanner, maybe the smell that he smelled affected his dreams because he saw all kinds of animals let down on a great seat, and he was told to rise, till, and eat.

And he said he couldn't because he was, he couldn't touch anything unclean. He was a fairly fastidious Jew. There must have been something troubling him because if he was that fastidious, he wouldn't have stayed with Simon the Tanner.

And maybe he, as he did at other times in his life, got caught a little bit off base. And there he was having this dream when there came a knock at the door, and there were three men from Cornelius asking him to come down to Caesarea.

So then Peter, with six men, goes down to Caesarea to this great center of Roman life and Roman culture and Roman power and Roman worship.

And he goes there, and he's welcomed into a house in Caesarea where he finds Cornelius and his friends and his relatives are all gathered together waiting to hear what he has to say.

[8 : 03] It would be roughly comparable to six very dirty, very hairy 1960 hippies going into the very fashionable pad of some 1980s yuppies and seeing if they had anything to say to each other.

Well, that's about the picture you have, though I want you to know that people smell differently. And I've always thought that to be a Christian, you should at least smell nice.

And that apparently doesn't work. And one of the things that you have to get over is the fact that sometimes Christians don't smell as nice as they should.

And my friend Bob Rau, who was a missionary for some years in India, tells me that because it was a Hindu community where all the Hindus were vegetarians and smelt nice, and all the Christians were meat eaters and smelt bad.

The Christians were known by their smell. So it's a different way of looking at things. But I want you to sort of heighten the contrast between Peter and these six Jews and Cornelius and his friends and relatives meeting together in the same room.

[9 : 31] And it was there that Peter begins the sermon, which is Acts chapter 10, verse 34 to 43.

Now this sermon, if you would like to know, is considered the most comprehensive summary of the preaching of the Acts of the Apostles that is found in the whole of the New Testament.

So if you want to know what Christianity is all about, sit down with Acts chapter 10, verses 34 to 43, and several pages of full scap, and try and flesh out all the things that Peter might have said.

We had the whole New Testament presented to us last week in about 17 seconds. Well, this takes a little longer, but it is a brief but comprehensive summary.

And so Peter stood up as a Jew before these Romans, and he said, I perceive that God is no respecter of persons.

[10 : 39] which means roughly speaking to you, that he would never have believed God would have had anything to do with the congregation he would then speak to.

And lots of preachers suffer from that. It's called the view from the pulpit, and it's a strange thing.

But when he said that, he then went on to say that he understood that God was no respecter of persons, but that anybody who feared God and lived and behaved in a relatively moral way, God would speak to.

So that in a sense, he said everybody is potentially capable of hearing the gospel. It's not who you are or where you come from.

Everybody is capable of hearing the gospel. Then he told them about the good news of peace through Jesus Christ. Now what peace means is that there is an area where people from very different backgrounds can meet together, some common place where they can encounter one another.

[11 : 55] And this is what the gospel of Jesus Christ has done. And then he told them that having laid that ground, John the Baptist came and preached repentance.

Jesus came and performed miracles and taught and dealt with people who were obsessed with all kinds of oppression from the powers of evil.

And he said, we were witnesses of that. We saw him do it. And then he goes on to tell them that this man, the Jewish authorities, saw fit to hang on a tree to crucify.

But that God saw fit to, on the third day, raise him from the dead. And he says, we ate and drank with him after he had been raised from the dead.

We were to be the witnesses to all the world of the fact of the resurrection. And then he said, we were commanded to preach.

[12 : 59] And that's why preaching goes on. Unpopular as it may be, long and suffocating as it may be, you do it because Christ has commanded us to preach whether you like it or not.

Because God has chosen to use this foolishness in his own way. And then he said, what we are to preach is that God has ordained Jesus, the one he has raised from the dead, to be the judge of the living and the dead.

Now mostly, when you get a judge, what you do with him is you clothe him in scarlet robes, you might put a large woolly wig on his head, provide him with a pair of brass pinch-nays, sit him behind a great oak desk, give him a very solemn countenance indeed, and have him in the position where he's looking down on everybody, and then you know you are being judged.

Because you stand before the judge. But the one whom God has appointed judge, he hasn't done it by robes and chambers and courtrooms and procedures of this kind, he has taken the man who has the right and the authority to pass judgment, and he has raised him from the dead.

So that you people are wonderfully free. There is no judge on earth that can ultimately condemn you. What's more, there is no judge on earth that could do anything else but condemn you.

[14 : 42] But this judge is the judge of the living and the dead. And you live under his judgment. That's what Peter told the Romans.

He says, the prophet warned us that believing on this man, this one whom God has appointed judge, you would be forgiven your sins.

And I would like to pause there to ask you if you know that you have this. As I judge, you would prefer that I didn't pause and ask you that, so I will leave it for you to do with what you want because it's obviously at the heart of the message.

But then, the passage that we read this morning comes into focus. While Peter, this is verse 44, was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.

And the believers from among the circumcised, those were the six Jews that were with Peter, and they were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.

[16 : 06] suddenly, God transformed that congregation while Peter went on preaching. And that's what you call a sermon that's too long.

God has begun to do a work in the congregation, and it would be well for the preacher to step down and let God go on with the work that he's doing. So, if your sermon has come to that point in your life, put up your hand, and I'll quit.

I won't look because the time I... But, you see, what happens is the preacher is commanded to preach, and as he's preaching, God, by his spirit, falls on the congregation.

And they suddenly become aware that they're not dealing as sophisticated yuppies with a rather uncultured, unlettered Jew from Jerusalem or from Nazareth or from Galilee, but that, in fact, they are dealing with God himself.

And may God grant that when we meet together as a congregation Sunday by Sunday, that we might know that we are doing business with the living God, that we might know that we are standing before him who is the judge of the living and the dead, and that we might be fallen on by the Holy Spirit.

[17 : 35] That belongs to us. That's not unnatural. Except of course it's unnatural. But it's supernatural. It's the reality.

It's the bottom line reality of Christian worship. That we should be fallen on by the Holy Spirit. And that's why the Jews were amazed to see that this had happened to unbaptized, uncircumcised, pagan Romans.

They simply couldn't believe it. And not only did it happen then, it happened the first time they ever heard a Christian sermon.

If you're now working your way through your 1,453,000 sermon and you've never experienced it, grant that you may have some sense of God's Holy Spirit falling on you.

As the Jews watched in amazement, they heard these Romans speaking in tongues and extolling God.

[18 : 46] and that was that the congregation suddenly began worshiping and speaking in tongues. Well, I think the Holy Spirit is fire in that traditional picture of the Holy Spirit.

I think speaking in tongues is a bit like lighting a match. the match goes out very quickly but the fire goes on. And so at the beginning of the church the match was struck, the fire was lit and went on burning.

And so in a sense when I told the children about the mystery of the source of heat in this parish, in this church building, I wanted to illustrate to them though I suspect not very successfully that we continue to worship because the fire of the Holy Spirit burns on.

And sometimes in our experience, certainly in mine and I'm sure in many of yours, people have been used as God's match by having this sudden sort of brilliant flaring up of the gift of tongues by which God sought to set fire to people who were cold and wet and damp and dissociated from one another and to start among them the fire of worship which is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

That's what's important. It's the fire, not the match. I don't want to come to such a difficult subject to talk about because for those who had the experience it's so unique.

[20 : 37] And I haven't had it, so I'm not talking as one who has. I knelt down with two friends who had the gift and they laid hands and prayed for me in tongues and everything, but it didn't happen.

I got up feeling guilty that I was stubborn and hard-hearted and all sorts of other terrible things. But I respected them and I think they continue to respect me.

but it's a hard gift to look for. I don't encourage anybody to go looking for it. Certainly these people didn't go looking for it.

It happened to them. And when it happened to them, it authenticated itself as being from God. And it was terribly important so that if you were to flip the page and look at it, you don't have to do it.

On the next column, chapter 11, verse 15 to 17, Peter is in trouble. Because when the Jews, the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem heard that Peter had gone down and stayed with, lived with, ate with, Roman heathens in Caesarea, they sort of brought him up on the carpet and said, Peter, what are you up to anyway?

[22 : 00] He was called up to account for himself. And so the same verses which appear in 1044 to 48, Peter tells the story in chapter 11, verse 15.

As I began to speak, Peter says, the Holy Spirit fell on him, just as on us at the beginning. He refers back to Pentecost. And I remembered the words of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

And in verse 17, if then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?

God. And you see, the whole business of our worship is initiated by God.

God brought Peter to a vision. God prepared Cornelius to a vision. God commanded Peter to preach. God commanded the Romans to respond and to hear.

[23 : 12] and in order that they might know the reality of him, God lit a match so that the fire of the community of the Holy Spirit should be begun among the Gentiles.

This passage is called the Gentile Pentecost. And Peter says, I couldn't do anything else. My friends and members of this congregation, let me tell you what we need so much to pray for and to look for and to be open to.

He said, God might initiate an activity among us so that it is not our business to try and say, God, please do this, or God, please do that, but God, give me grace to keep up with what you're already doing in my life and in our lives as a congregation.

That the initiative comes from him and that we be given grace to keep up with what he's doing. So Peter said, I couldn't do anything else.

And the Christians in Jerusalem were forced to acknowledge that God had done what God had chosen to do and that they had no business but to praise God that he had done.

[24 : 32] God doesn't act in obedience to us. He calls us to act in obedience to him. Well, in a very simple way, let me conclude by telling you what I want you to do after church.

Very important what happens after church. You see, what happens is that you can come in like a wet log to the fire of worship and you don't even get warm in terms of the work of the Holy Spirit.

And you go out and return into the cold and such warmth that you may have soon evaporates away and you feel a spiritual chill take hold of your bones again.

You are to be to one another the means of sharing the fire and warmth of the Holy Spirit. You are to ignite one another as you have contact one with another.

Probably the most important work of Sunday morning church happens in the half hour after Sunday morning church is over. As we have opportunity to share with one another, to witness to one another, and to, in obedience to Christ, give some expression to our love one for another.

[25 : 57] And this isn't an activity of the preacher or of the liturgy. It's an act of God the Holy Spirit, causing the fire of the Holy Spirit to burn among us so that we are consumed in praise and in worship and in love and thanksgiving for all that God has done for us.

Let us pray. God, help us to have grace that if you were to lead us into a situation which is totally alien to us, maybe we find even this church over the area, the company of these people over the area.

Will you help us to acknowledge your sovereignty and your goodness and your grace? Will you by your Holy Spirit so inform our minds and inflame our hearts that we may not be ashamed but rather compelled to be obedient to your word and to loving one another as we are wrapped in the flames of your love for us and parted by your Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus and your Holy Spirit in the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Now I invite you to join in singing the offertory hymn.

It's number 410. I invite you to join in singing the offertory hymn.

[28 : 44] I invite you to join in singing the offertory hymn.

I invite you to join in singing the offertory hymn.

I invite you to join in singing the offertory hymn. I invite you to join in singing the offertory hymn.

Thank you.