

Cut to the Heart

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” Acts 2:38-39

The Holy Spirit set the context for Peter’s Pentecost message. The Spirit’s presence was demonstrated in power, purity and praise. The invading Spirit seemed like a violent wind filling the upper room, and the purifying presence of the Spirit appeared as tongues of fire resting on each one of the disciples, and the prophesying Spirit inspired the disciples to declare the wonders of God in intelligible, indigenous speech. The reaction of the God-fearing Jews was divided, some were amazed and perplexed and asked, “What does this mean?” But others made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

The fact that the Holy Spirit provoked the questions that Peter answered is important. “. . .The great missionary proclamations in Acts are not given on the unilateral initiative of the apostles but in response to questions asked by others, questions prompted by the presence of something which calls for explanation. In discussions about the contemporary mission of the Church it is often said that the Church ought to address itself to the real questions which people are asking. That is to misunderstand the mission of Jesus and the mission of the Church. The world’s questions are not the questions which lead to life. What really needs to be said is that where the Church is faithful to its Lord, there the powers of the kingdom are present and people begin to ask the question to which the gospel is the answer” (Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 119).

This past week Ginny and I were in Toronto for the Mensah project mission board meeting. David shared with the board an incident that impressed him as the leading of the Holy Spirit. A shaman or witch doctor had recently moved in next door to the project site. He had made it known that he opposed the project and wanted the Christians to leave. David went to his home and greeted him, as he would with anyone new in the village, but the man was provoked and expressed his displeasure. In a place that takes evil spiritual powers seriously, this situation was troubling to the project staff. David and Jacob agreed not to say anything to Andrew about it, because they didn’t want him upset and afraid. The next day, Andrew had been asked to give the devotional at the staff meeting. Not knowing anything that was on the minds of the staff, he chose Ephesians 6, although his original plan was to share from Proverbs 3. He read to them, “Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to

stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand”(Eph 6:11-13). Andrew said that Jacob just stared at him with his mouth open. Jacob was amazed that Andrew, although totally unaware of the problem, was speaking directly to the situation that was on the leaders’ minds. Both David and Jacob believed that the Lord was speaking to them through the newest member of the team.

Peter is the first illustration of what it means to “preach the Word; to be prepared in season and out of season; to correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Tim 4:2). Filled with the Spirit, Peter was not about to be dissuaded. He stood on behalf of the Twelve and raised his voice to offer an *explanation*. In the Spirit charged atmosphere of Pentecost, it is especially important to underscore the importance of intelligible communication. The mind matters, precisely because the Spirit of Truth is present. Jesus promised that the Spirit would convict the world of guilt because of sin and righteousness and judgment. The revealed truth of God ought to define our subjective experience and not the other way around. “One of the highest and noblest functions the human mind is to listen to God’s Word, and to read his mind and think his thoughts after him, both in nature and in Scripture” (Stott, *Your Mind Matters*, 21).

True persuasion comes as a result of a reasoned presentation of the Gospel. Peter is about to provide solid biblical content, with insights that are as thoughtful as they are Spirit-led. It is not an academic discourse, couched in philosophical terms and complicated vocabulary, but it is a rational discourse. Peter spoke to the heart through the mind. His proclamation required serious reflection. We have to engage the intellect in order to be effective. We cannot bypass the mind and focus directly on feelings. This makes preaching in our day difficult because “entertainment is the metaphor for all discourse” (Postman). How can we bring the message of Jesus to a lost and hurting culture in a light-hearted, entertaining, upbeat way? If we take our cue from Peter, we will ignore such a question and speak directly to the minds and hearts of people who need Christ.

Preaching lacks everything that worldly speech finds impressive, but it does not lack intelligibility. “The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God” but that is no excuse for thoughtless preaching. Peter’s expressed concern is to offer an *explanation*. The very idea that someone can begin a message by introducing the biblical text by saying, “Listen carefully this is God’s Word,” is enough to invite the skeptic to look for the exit. Nevertheless, the imperative remains, “Preach the Word!”

Salvation’s Timing: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Peter’s first concern was to define reality. “This is that” is how Peter began. He drew on the ancient prophecy of Joel to explain what was happening. What his hearers witnessed was nothing less than the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy. It takes about three minutes to read Peter’s message, so we can safely assume he spoke much longer than that. Luke tells us that “with many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them,” but we don’t know how much he said about Joel, the ninth century B.C. prophet, whom he quoted. What is striking, however, is that it was not only Joel’s prophecy of the outpouring of the Spirit of God, but his call for repentance that

fits with Peter's Pentecost message.

The central theme of Joel's prophetic message was to relate the crisis in his own day to the coming day of the Lord and how that crisis ought to lead to immediate repentance and spiritual renewal. "'Even now,' declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.'" (2:12). Contrary to those who claimed there was nothing they could do in the wake of this disaster, Joel interpreted the locust plague as a call to genuine repentance. "Rend your heart and not your garments." The events were so overwhelming that Joel expected people to be shocked out of their complacency and cynicism.

Joel was confident that the Lord would respond quickly to genuine repentance. He would restore the land (2:19) and remove the threat (2:20). Sorrow would be turned to joy and the watchword would go out, "Be not afraid, O land...Be not afraid, O wild animals...Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God" (2:21-23). What the disaster had taken away would be restored by the Lord. Once again there would be plenty of grain and new wine. "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten..." declared the Lord (2:25). The end result of this outpouring of blessing would be to confirm to his people the exclusive truth claim of Yahweh. "Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the Lord your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed" (2:27).

But Joel's prophecy does not stop there. He was led by the Spirit to take this even further and project God's blessing into the future of salvation history. His prophecy moves from the present crisis to that extended period of time in the future, known as the day of the Lord. Joel's transition from his contemporary horizon to a future horizon is brief on purpose. His little phrase, "and afterward," introduced a new era in salvation history without fanfare. He minimized the gap between the present and the future to stress that the people of God were meant to live in the present with the eminent expectation of the future. In other words, we are to live today in the light of eternity.

And what is to come "afterward"? Joel declared the word of the Lord,

"I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls" (2:28-32).

Joel used the same poetic skill and spiritual intensity to describe the coming day of the Lord that he had used to discern the power and purpose of evil. He voiced what Moses had hoped for years before, when he said, "I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" (Num 11:29).

What immediately strikes most Christians about Joel's prophecy is the convergence of Pentecost and the final judgment. Joel's vision of the Day of the Lord brings together two endpoints and brackets the Day of the Lord. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit climaxes *the end of the beginning* of the Day of the Lord. That new day arrived in the person of Jesus Christ, and reached its climax following Christ's resurrection, when the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, came upon the disciples. The outpouring of the Spirit brought unprecedented public notice to this whole new age.

Joel's prophecy describes the outpouring of the Spirit in two ways: first, the followers of the Lord will be blessed with insight and understanding; and second, the dreadful day of the Lord will be announced with a dramatic display of apocalyptic signs. At Pentecost, the apostle Peter saw these two events converging not only theologically but historically. He quoted the whole Joel passage, including both the outpouring of the Spirit for gospel insight and the outpouring of the Spirit for apocalyptic judgment. As time went on he reflected on God's purpose for delaying the final judgment. He encouraged and admonished believers, saying, "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare" (2 Pet 3:8-10).

The distance between Peter's listeners and today's listener becomes especially evident over the matter of sin and salvation. We may have a weak view of sin and vague notion of salvation. It may be even difficult for us to acknowledge our need for salvation. What do people think today, when they hear the apostle Peter say, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved!" They might prefer an extreme makeover to atonement for their sins. They might want their house completely remodeled than their heart's transformed.

In the movie *Castaway*, Tom Hanks plays Chuck Nolan, an efficiency expert for FedEx. His life consists of work and a relationship with a girl friend. Just before he boards a FedEx flight to the South Pacific he proposes to her. He kisses her goodbye and assures her he'll be back in a week, but his plane goes down in a terrible storm and he washes up on a deserted island. He is the lone survivor and a modern day version of Robinson Crusoe. The differences between the movie *Castaway* and Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* illustrate the gap between survival and salvation and a modern reductionistic view of life.

The contrast between *Castaway* and *Robinson Crusoe* could not be greater. In Defoe's novel, Crusoe emerges from his nearly three decades of isolation a much stronger person in the end than he was at the beginning. His isolation proved invaluable. In the providence of God, his solitary life led him to examine himself. Suffering opened his heart and mind to God. Stripped of everything worldly, he saw himself as he really was, "without desire of good or conscience of evil." He began to lament his "stupidity of soul" and his ingratitude to God. Illness led him to pray for the first time in years, "Lord be my help, for I am in great distress." When he began to

ask, “Why has God done this to me? What have I done to deserve this?” His conscience checked him, “Wretch! Ask what you have done! Look back upon a dreadful misspent life and ask what you have done. Ask, why you have not been destroyed long before this!”

Robinson Crusoe is much more than a story about survival. It is a story about salvation. Like the prodigal son, who ran off to the far country, squandered his inheritance, but came to his senses, Crusoe became deeply convinced and convicted of his wickedness. When he earnestly sought the Lord’s help in repenting of his sins, he providentially came to the words in the Bible, “God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel” (Acts 5:31). He describes his reaction, “I threw down the book, and with all my heart as well as my hands lifted up to Heaven, in a kind of ecstasy of joy, I cried out aloud, ‘Jesus, Thou Son of David, Jesus, Thou exalted Prince and Savior, give me repentance!’” Instead of praying for physical deliverance he prayed for the forgiveness of his sins. Deliverance from sin was “a much greater blessing than deliverance from affliction.”

He came to the sober conclusion that the salvation of his soul meant far more to him than his deliverance from captivity. “...I began to conclude in my mind that it was possible for me to be more happy in this forsaken, solitary condition than it was probable I should ever have been in any other particular state in the world; and with this thought I was going to give thanks to God for bringing me to this place.” Instead of a slow and fearful descent into despair, Crusoe experienced God’s rhythms of grace. He read his Bible and prayed daily. He planted crops, made furniture, baked bread, built a canoe, and established an orderly, disciplined life. He lived a life of mercy, not sorrow, and his singular goal was to “make my sense of God’s mercy to me.”

The message of *Castaway* is that life is a solitary struggle for survival fueled by the human spirit and the existential self. Love, particularly romantic love, can be a great motivator, but relationships are often disappointing and not enduring. Loneliness and isolation expose the myths of modern life, and in the end we are directionless. The message of *Robinson Crusoe* is that life is a struggle in our soul between self-rule and God’s will, and it can only come to resolution by the grace and mercy of God. Apart from the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ there is no hope, but with Christ we can experience an abundant life even in affliction and suffering.

R. E. O. White describes the nature of salvation:

“The comprehensiveness of salvation may be shown (1) By what we are saved from. This includes sin and death; guilt and estrangement; ignorance of truth; bondage to habit and vice; fear of demons, of death, of life, of God, of hell; despair of self; alienation from others; pressures of the world; a meaningless life.” And (2) by what we are saved for: “peace with God, access to God’s favor and presence, hope of regaining the glory intended for men and women, endurance in suffering, steadfast character, an optimistic mind, inner motivations of divine love and the power of the Spirit, ongoing experience of the risen Christ within our souls, and sustaining joy in God (Rom 5:1-11). Salvation extends also to society, aiming at realizing the kingdom of God; to nature, ending its bondage to futility

(Rom 8:19-20); and to the universe, attaining final reconciliation of a fragmented cosmos (Eph 1:10; Col 1:20).”

“Salvation is past, present and future: “That is, salvation includes that which is given, freely and finally, by God’s grace (forgiveness, justification, friendship, reconciliation, atonement, sonship, and new birth); that which is continually imparted (sanctification—growing emancipation from evil, growing enrichment of all good—the enjoyment of eternal life, experience of the Spirit’s power, liberty, joy, advancing maturity in conformity to Christ); and that still to be attained (redemption of the body, perfect Christlikeness, final glory).”

“Salvation is spiritual (acceptance with God, forgiveness, adoption, reception of the Spirit, immortality); emotional (strong assurance, peace, courage, hopefulness, joy); practical (prayer, guidance, discipline, dedication, service); ethical (new moral dynamic for new moral aims, freedom, victory); personal (new thoughts, convictions, horizons, motives, satisfactions, self-fulfillment); social (new sense of community with Christians, of compassion toward all, overriding impulse to love as Jesus has loved).” (see R. E. O. White in EDT, 968).

Salvation’s Savior: “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are witnesses of the fact.”

Having explained the need for the gospel, Peter goes on to explain the source and substance of the Gospel. In the tradition of Jesus’ dialogue with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, when the risen Lord “explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself,” Peter’s message harvests the truth about Christ from the Old Testament (Lk 24:27). He quotes the Psalms (16; 110) as fulfilled messianic prophecies. These then are the facts of the Gospel: Jesus of Nazareth was accredited, handed over, crucified, raised from the dead, and exalted. What David said about himself in Psalm 16 was even more literally true for Jesus. “Seeing what was to come,” David “spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are witnesses of the fact” (Acts 2:31-32).

“The news that the rejected and crucified Jesus is alive is something that cannot possibly be suppressed. It must be told. Who could be silent about such a fact? . . . It is a striking fact, moreover, that almost all the proclamations of the gospel which are described in Acts are in response to questions asked by those outside the Church. This is so in the case of Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost The sermon leads up to a climax in the citing of the Psalm 110. Jesus, whom they had crucified, is now seated at the right hand of God until all things are put under his feet. This has to be told to all who will hear simply because it is the truth. This is the reality which all human beings must henceforth take into account. The real government of the universe, the final reality which in the end confronts every human being, is the crucified and risen Jesus” (Newbigin, 116).

Salvation's Response: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven."

Luke, the physician, used the *heart* as a metaphor for our deepest thoughts and commitments. You recall in chapter one that the eleven disciples prayed for wisdom to the Lord who is everybody's heart-knower. Luke captures the people's response to Peter's Gospel message in phrase. They were "cut to the heart." It is a remarkable phrase and reminds us of the thrust of Joel's message: "Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning." and "Rend your heart and not your garments."

Dallas Willard emphasizes the importance of repentance:

"Much of what is called Christian profession today involves no remorse or sorrow at all over who one is or even for what one had done. There is little awareness of being lost or of a radical evil in our hearts, bodies, and souls—which we must get away from and which only God can deliver us. To manifest such awareness today would be regarded—and certainly by most Christians as well—as psychologically sick. It is common today to hear Christians talk of their 'brokenness.' But when you listen closely, you may discover that they are talking about their *wounds*, the things they have suffered, not about the evil that is in them."

"Few today have discovered that they have been disastrously wrong and that they cannot change or escape the consequences of it on their own. There is little sense of 'Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a person of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts' (Isa 6:5).

"Yet, without this realization of our utter ruin and without the genuine revisioning and redirecting of our lives, which that bitter realization naturally gives rise to, no clear path to inner transformation can be found. It is psychologically and spiritually impossible. We will steadfastly remain on the throne of our universe, so far as we are concerned, perhaps trying to 'use a little God' here and there." (Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 60).

Peter answered their question clearly. "What, then, are we to do?' the answer is 'Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus.' To repent is to the U-turn of the mind which enables you to believe what is hidden from sight, the reality of the presence of the reign of God in the crucified Jesus. To be baptized is to be identified with, incorporated into that which Jesus did when he went down into the waters of Jordan as one of a company of sin-burdened men and women and so inaugurated a mission which would lead him through his great encounter with the principalities and powers to its victorious climax in the cross. To be baptized is to be incorporated into the dying of Jesus so as to become a participant in his risen life, and so to share his ongoing mission to the world. It is to be baptized into his mission." (Newbigin: *The Gospel*

in a Pluralistic Society, 116-117).

Salvation's Warning: "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

The passion of the biblical passage is invariably related to a tension in the text.

(1) The first tension has to do with Peter's exclusive appeal to "fellow Jews." He clearly focuses on the "people of Israel." His audience is Jewish, "let all of Israel be assured of this" (2:14, 22, 36). This is in tension with what we know is coming—the radical inclusiveness of the Gospel. And Peter is going to be the principle agent for that transformation. But it is important to realize and emphasize that Christianity is the purest form of Judaism. Jesus, the Messiah has come. The promises to Abraham and Moses were not forgotten but fulfilled. He was "accredited by God" first to the Jews, then to the world. Peter is going to struggle with what it means to be Christ's "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." On Pentecost, Peter did not understand just how radical Joel's prophecy really was. He proclaimed the word of the Lord through Joel that said, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people." Peter saw no place for gender or age discrimination, but it would take some special work of the Holy Spirit to convince him that literally "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." He is about to learn what the Spirit means when Peter preaches, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (2:39).

(2) The passion of this passage is also related to a second tension in the text. Peter begins intentionally by saying "Jesus of Nazareth was a man" and ends by declaring him to be "both Lord and Messiah—exalted to the right hand of God." Everything to do with salvation and the Gospel has to do with Jesus the Christ. If we do not believe in the breadth of the truth about Jesus we do not believe in Jesus. Jesus is not one savior among many but the only Savior. He does not stand beside, Moses and Mohammed, Buddha and Vishnu, as an inspiration for higher living. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life and no one comes to the Father but through him (Jn 14:6).

(3) The passion of this passage is related to a third tension in the text. This is the tension between the amazing grace of God and the appalling sin in which we share (Newbigin, 178). How can "God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge" coincide with wicked men nailing Jesus to the cross? How can the same event be attributed to both the grace of God and the evil of man? This is the mystery of God's love, in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. If this tension doesn't mean anything to us, we will never be cut to the heart. We will never make that U-turn and repent and be baptized. We will never see our salvation resting in Christ alone. We will never experience the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

(4) Finally, Peter closed his message with a special appeal that highlights the tension between God's gift and our responsibility. It is the Lord who saves; there is no doubt in Peter's mind on that score. It is the Spirit who cuts to the heart. The truth is plain: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." However, he throws his

heart and soul into the conclusion. Persuasion belongs to the Lord, but Peter is filled with passion. “With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’” The plea to save ourselves is futile if we think that salvation can be found in anyone or anything other than Jesus Christ. For “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Here then is the first Gospel message delivered in the power of the Holy Spirit. It was a carefully thought-out, reasoned discourse, drawing on the meaning of Salvation history and focusing on the crucified, risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ. In the Spirit, Peter compelled these God-fearing Jews to receive their Messiah through sincere repentance and life-defining baptism.