

Acts 2:14

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd.

Preaching is a funny thing to preach about

- The preacher senses that the congregation feels he has a vested interest in preaching
- Rather like the Latin master extolling the virtues of Latin
- He is convinced by what he is saying
- But the majority of people think his craft is going right out of fashion
- In my childhood days the notices invariably said, 'our preacher next Sunday will be'
- But somewhere along the line this became 'our worship next Sunday will be led by'
- We certainly have a renewed awareness of worship and perhaps also the sacraments
- But I believe that preaching is important today

I do not say this because I am a preacher, intent on preserving my own occupation

- When I first felt that God was calling me into Christian ministry
- The part of the job that I was most apprehensive about was preaching
- The more seriously you take preaching the more demoralising it can become
- Take, for example, the issue of the length of the sermon
- There is no particular virtue in long sermons, no particular virtue in short sermons
- But many congregations imply that the sermon is something to be endured
- Now I have endured some endless sermons
- And in some of them I have been the preacher
- But length is not the all-important factor
- Local preachers will know all too well that congregations these days tend to be small
- Certainly a great number of my sermons were given in buildings that are 20% full
- Or put another way, 80% empty

In the great majority of churches where I have been the preacher

- Congregations could have given a lot more thought to how they could be helpful
- It's different outside of the church, you expect a more hostile crowd there
- But inside the church the preacher and the congregation should not be in opposition
- Visiting preachers are often given many guidelines but congregations are given few
- Today's congregations are different from the congregations when I started preaching
- In those days people would enter the church quietly
- And spend the time before the service in prayer
- reading the hymns and songs
- At the festivals people can guess the Bible readings, or carry on from the last service
- Now, in the laudable desire to be friendly, the time of prayerful preparation is lost
- But perhaps we should all review how we prepare for the service
- During the service, sitting in a helpful place and way, trying to look interested
- Following in the Bible or other books as appropriate – perhaps making a few notes
- These days, it seems to me, very few people think about following up the sermon
- Going home and reading the scripture passage over again
- And prayerfully considering, 'how can the Word of God to impact on my life?'

I can't speak for those preachers who prepare their sermons in 10 minutes or so

- On the back of an odd scrap of paper, though some do

- For me, preaching takes a great investment in money, time and preparation
- Money might surprise you – but Bible commentaries do not come cheap
- I have about £3-4,000 worth of Bible books and £1,000 worth of computer software
- All directly on the Bible, other Christian books will probably double the total
- And many local preachers will have invested a lot of money in books to help them
- On average it takes me about five hours to prepare a sermon
- And it probably takes the local preachers longer
- And whether the sermon has meant a lot to the congregation or not
- It has probably meant a lot to the preacher

In shaping our theology and practice, Methodists regard Scripture as supremely important

- We use Christian tradition, reason and experience to help us interpret the Bible
- But it is still the Bible that is the supreme rule of faith and practice
- I am not going to say much about using Christian tradition and reason today
- But I do want to mention Scripture and experience
- Scripture leads to the conclusion that preaching is important for the people of God
- Preaching has been a great tradition of the church and there are good reasons for that
- But it is to experience I turn to apply that in Christian living
- ‘Experience’ does not mean anecdotal evidence – it is more like ‘testimony’
- I believe that preaching is the God-given way to make God’s salvation known
- Both the message and the method seeming strange (1 Cor 1:21)
- But this has applied in my own personal experience
- My whole life was changed by the preaching of two men
- My Father and Gareth Crossley, my minister when I was a student in Leicester
- But their preaching was not the same
- My Father had a warm devotional style of preaching
- With plenty of illustrations drawn from nature and life’s experience
- We toured the Bible with the men of God, Abraham, Jacob, Elijah, Elisha, Peter, Paul
- In contrast, Gareth was heavily doctrinal, clinical, spare illustrations and little humour
- I was enthralled – their preaching changed my life

When we turn to Acts 2

- we find a record of what happened when Peter stood up and preached
- The word for Peter’s preaching (v.14) is the same word for their speaking (v.4)
- Authentic preaching is not just words but ‘utterance’ in the power of the Spirit
- Peter preached and by the grace of God lives were changed
- The church has forgotten how to change lives – but it has forgotten how to preach
- So congregations must pray, pray and pray again for their preachers
- If you do not think much of the preacher, as a person or as a preacher
- Then you have to pray all the more
- We are not committed to any particular style of preaching
- Peter the fisherman and Paul the scholar probably preached in different styles
- But the message and the overall effect were much the same

It was preaching that:

I DISTURBED

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart.

(Acts 2: 37)

Too much of what happens in today's church makes us feel comfortable and complacent

- We have toned down references to our sinfulness and vileness
- In *Hymns and Psalms* the 'vilest offender' has become 'every offender'
- Most of us don't think of ourselves as 'vile'
- Perhaps just slightly better or slightly worse than average
- But as with most theological mistakes, we reach such conclusions
- When we lose our focus on the holiness of God and the purity of Jesus
- Consequently, we have lost a right conception of how great our salvation really is
- For the Lord to save the 'vilest offender' is a miracle
- For the Lord to save the better than average is no great thing – it's his job
- But this false perception of ourselves will not do
- If we take our eyes off the Saviour we might start to feel too good to need saving
- We could look at people around us and consider ourselves better than them
- Or, if we take our eyes off the Saviour we might start to feel too bad to be saved
- We could look at the people around us and consider ourselves worse than them
- But whether we consider ourselves better or worse than others is of little consequence
- The same kind of sins that caused Jesus to walk the road to Calvary's cross
- Self-interest, religious bigotry, jealousy, gossip, false witness, expedience
- Are the same kind of sins that we regularly commit

The sentiments of the New England preacher, Jonathan Edwards

- *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* sound way out of fashion today
- When we focus on God, his holiness and purity we can reach no other conclusion
- We are sinners and God is angry with us – such a revelation is disturbing

That is why the words of Peter are as relevant to us as they were to that first congregation:

God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.

(Acts 2: 36)

Here then is hope for the sinner, God is unfolding his plan of salvation

- Though God's wrath and anger are kindled against sin
- He has sent his own Son to be an offering, a sacrifice, a sin-bearer
- This is God's love, mercy and grace in action
- That is why our faith is all of Jesus and all of the cross

Who is the world's most famous 20th century preacher?

- If you thought about it you could probably guess
- I did a *Google* search and for 'world's most famous preacher'
- And it confirmed my hunch – Billy Graham

Some years ago I attended nine Billy Graham meetings in London

- Three at Crystal Palace Athletics Stadium and six at Earl's Court Arena
- Therefore, I reckon that I am well qualified to comment on his preaching

- In terms of the sermons that win prizes in newspaper competitions
- The sermons Billy Graham preached were not great sermons

Our local preachers on trial still have to read a selection of John Wesley's Sermons

- Until recently they had to read all *Forty-four*
- No wonder we called them preachers 'on trial'
- Their sermons of John Wesley in the books are sermonic essays
- Add to that the eighteenth century English and they are not that gripping

The great thing about the sermons of Billy Graham, John Wesley and other great preachers

- Is that they really made a difference to the people that heard
- They are not intended to be works of art, or entertainment or entries in a competition
- The prayers of the people, the anointing of the Spirit and the power of preaching
- What previous generations called unction (anointing) and utterance (powerful speech)
- Powerful preaching is preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit
- I am the last person to knock academic learning, diligent preparation and good speech
- But, of themselves, these are not enough
- Because we have not had powerful preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit
- We have tried to substitute all kinds of (not necessarily wrong in themselves)
- Therefore, we have Christian writers, Christian singers, Christian musicians
- We have books, artists, concerts, performances (not necessarily wrong in themselves)
- But these can never be any substitute for preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit
- The kind of preaching that creates a disturbance
- It cuts people to the heart and causes them to ask

Brothers, what shall we do?

(Acts 2: 37)

The reply is clear enough:

Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. 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)

Peter's answer to the people's anguished cry presents us with complex theological problems

- But we must not forget that Peter's words came to his hearers as the best news ever
- Not just a set of theological problems

'Repent' means a complete change of heart and confession of sin

- He calls on everyone to repent and to be baptised
- Repentance, baptism and forgiveness of sins clearly go together
- The invitation was to all the hearers but the response was from individuals

There is more than a possibility that many of the crowd had been baptised before

- For those who converted to Judaism (proselytes) were baptised

- Others would have been baptised by John the Baptist – a baptism of repentance
- But the key thing here was that baptism was to be ‘in the name of Jesus Christ’
- That is a person repenting and being baptised is calling upon the name of Jesus
- Looking to be committed to and identified with Jesus
- The gift is the gift of the Spirit himself, who ministers the saving work of Christ
- Applying and working out the benefits of Christ’s salvation
- In the heart and life of the believer
- It is not necessary to be baptised to be saved
- It runs contrary to all biblical teaching to assume that outward rites
- Have any value apart from true repentance and an inward change
- The Jewish mind did not readily separate outward expression from inward change
- And wherever the gospel was proclaimed to Jews, baptism was taken for granted
- But, when Peter preached to Gentiles (Acts 3:12-26) he told them to repent
- He told them to turn to God, that their sins would be wiped out (Acts 3:19)
- But he made no mention of baptism as being necessary to salvation
- That is not to say that baptism is unimportant but it is not essential to salvation
- In short, baptism is a symbol for entry into the Christian family
- It is ‘leaving them’ and ‘joining us’
- Therefore, it is not a private spiritual experience
- But a declaration of joining the Christian community (worldwide and local)
- In many churches infant baptism (the promise is for you and your children)
- Is followed by a period of preparation and growing maturity followed by membership
- The sense of belonging to the local church is important and, as regards to baptism,
- The important thing is not the outward sign but the heart, repenting and believing

The preaching of the gospel is disturbing – if we are not disturbed God has not spoken

- There are times when God’s message is comforting but never complacent
- Every time we hear a sermon (or read our Bibles for that matters)
- We should be thinking what is the word of God for me in this and how can I respond?

The preaching of the word disturbs, but the preaching of the word also:

II DIRECTS

John Stott, the great Anglican preacher and writer has rightly said

- Ignorance is probably the greatest enemy of the Christian faith today
- I think that he was speaking of those who are outside of the church
- Who do not even have a clear grasp of what they are rejecting
- But it is important to realise that it is a great problem inside the church as well

When the first converts were baptised that was not the end but the beginning

- They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship
- To the breaking of bread and to prayer

The early Christians were devoted to apostolic teaching

- Christians today are in need of good, sound apostolic teaching
- This will be achieved by a combination of two factors

The first is that God raises up ministers, preachers and teachers to teach the truth

- This is the truth that is contained in his word and not fanciful speculation
- Peter's sermon was biblical, relevant, powerful and practical
- And it bore witness to the central truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ
- Crucified, buried, risen, ascended, glorified and calling all to repent and believe

The second factor is that Christians in local churches are determined to be taught

- This would require a programme of real learning and discipleship
- And consistent Bible teaching in sermons, study groups and personal devotions

They were also committed to fellowship

- Fellowship is one of the misunderstood words in the church today
- Fellowship is being disciples together
- The genuine interaction of sinners seeking to love one another
- In the context of loving the Lord Jesus
- Real fellowship, though hard to describe, is unmistakable once you enter into it

The early Christians were committed to the breaking of bread and to prayer

- The breaking of bread was a simple and yet moving way of remembering Jesus
- This was something that united them in bonds of fellowship with Jesus and each other
- While prayer also united them in fellowship with Jesus and each other

I PREACHING DISTURBS

II PREACHING DIRECTS

III PREACHING DIVIDES

It seems incredible to say this at a time when unity is so much on the church's agenda

- Yet it is true that preaching divides

Peter cried out to the people:

Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.

(Acts 2: 40)

This was an incredibly divisive thing to say

- Some people would continue in much the same way as before
- The apostles' preaching would have no significant effect on them
- Or they would be disturbed for a while, but then it would wear off
- Or, almost worse still, they would know what to do but decide not to do it

But there would also be others, who having heard the message would be transformed

- So much so that they would speak of their former lives as dead in trespasses and sins
- And the new life as being made alive in Christ

There are, of course, many wrong reasons for being divided

- But is right that we are divided from the world at large, and numbered with Christ
- And even in the church, we need to be with those determined to learn and grow
- And not just coming along to make up the numbers

- For sadly, even churches are divided between those who want to please God
- And those who would like to jog along in much the same way as always

At the heart of any growing church will be preaching from God's word

- That disturbs
- That directs
- That divides

And with the Spirit's anointing and the prayers of the people

- It will be preaching and Christianity in the power of the Holy Spirit
- Faithful to the witness of the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ