Sermons in Acts:

Acts 2: The first Christian Pentecost

We are glad to publish the first in a series of expository articles entitled *Sermons in Acts* by the **Revd Gervais Angel,** Director of Studies at Trinity College, Bristol

It comes as a surprise to us to hear how about two or three thousand people being converted on one day. However, the percentage figure, if you think of the potential audience on that occasion, was considerably lower than the percentage response at Mission Sheffield in 1985. the Mission Sheffield percentage response was calculated at around ten per cent. The total of the people who *could* have heard Peter at Jerusalem on this occasion was considerably higher than the Sheffield audiences. The regular population of Jerusalem was really quite small. The number given by Jeramias is bound to be speculative, but as he worked on the figures over the successive years be became more and more modest, and he reckoned finally that the regular population was about 20,000 to 30,000 people.

However, when it came to the great festivals, to Passover in particular or, again, to this festival of Pentecost, pilgrims greatly increased the population. Josephus, writing in the same century as this speech was delivered, gave colossal numbers. He quoted about two million as the number of those who could have arrived at the festivals, but this is reckoned to be a gross exaggeration. About 125,000 people was Jeremias' general figure for the pilgrims, based on how many people he could pack into the temple at Passover, for example, and that was a pretty tight fit. So, if we think of about 100,000 people in Jerusalem on that great festival, then the potential audience was really quite great in relation to the recorded response. This observation takes the Pentecost incident out of the realm of the extraordinary and the miraculous. the miracles that took place in the Acts of the Apostles were not numerical miracles. We tend to make a god of numbers, but this is no reason for foisting the same fascination on the early church. They looked for other things. And there would be many people who were going up to Jerusalem with great anticipation.

This had happened to Jesus. Jesus was taken to Jerusalem for a festival at about the age of 12. It was customary for the Jew, certainly if he lived in Judea, to attempt to go up three times a year for the three great festivals. There is an interesting religious parallel here between Judaism and traditional Anglicanism. According to the Prayer Book, the kosher Anglican is the one who observes the three festivals at Christmas, Easter and Whitsun. And, on that principle, the membership of the Church of England used to be calculated from Easter communicants. For Diaspora Jews, however, living wider afield, to go once a year to one of the festivals would be reckoned orthodox, but they never reached the position which is held in Islam today of a once-in-a-lifetime visit to Mecca. Once a year was regarded as the normal thing for a Jew, even if you were one of the Diaspara. So there were great crowds gathered for this Jewish feast of Pentecost. These crowds, both the full proselytes and the Jews, would gather together to celebrate the traditional festival. And they came from very wide afield on this particular occasion (Acts 2: 8-11).

What we call Pentecost became a massive surprise. Think for a moment what the disciples of Jesus had to go on. They had promises. According to the Gospel tradition and also to the first chapter of Acts, they had the promises of Jesus that he would see them again and a promise in John that the Holy Spirit would come to them. They had promises of a renewed presence. He had gone. They were to that extent on their own, but they had the promise of the renewed presence, whether in his own coming or in the coming of the promised Spirit. But when he came they were brought into a ministry that they had not conceived. They could see what was happening, or at least it was clear to Peter what was happening when it actually happened, but they could not have conceived it earlier. In I Corinthians: 12-14 Paul makes a very clear distinction between speaking in tongues and prophecy, and he says that uninterpreted tongues builds up the individual. Only interpreted tongues has a public ministry. Therefore he prefers prophecy in public because it is generally intelligible to the public.

Now at the Pentecost of Acts tongues and prophecy are rolled into one. Or, to put the point another way, Luke does not make the same distinction as Paul. Here was ecstatic speech, but remarkably people understood in different languages. There was 'unmeditated interpretation'. The symbolism is quite clear, that what came at Pentecost was for all nations. There were representatives of nations drawn from several parts of the inhabited world, and God was reaching out to all these different nations. He was not saying: 'You must learn Hebrew or Aramaic or septuagintal Greek before I can reach you. I am reaching out to you now. What is coming now is for you, whether you come from here, you come from there, or you come from somewhere else'. And this is for us the

constant challenge of God. That when God calls and gifts a person there is the challenge to give, to share. And giving out to people to whom, maybe, we have no instinct nor desire to give out. If people had not crossed the cultural barriers, there would not have been what we call traditionally 'missions'. Indeed, if God had given ministries only in order to minister to our own, then it is conceivable that the Gospel would have remained in the Eastern Mediterranean area.

However, the fact that it went out to Gentiles and was not confined to Jews was by divine revelation, as we shall see when we look later at the speech in Cornelius' house. It was also by divine revelation that the Gospel moved from Asia over to Europe (Acts 16: 9). But we do not have parallel accounts of specific divine instructions for people to move into the Latin areas of the Roman Empire. In fact, nobody knows to this day how the Gospel got to Rome. Ambrosiaster suggested it came through the Jews. he says, 'susceperant fidem christi ritu licet iudaico' ('albeit by the Jewish rite'). Nor do we know the mechanics of the situation, the process of evangelisation. But it was clear that people were reaching outside their own sphere, that they were crossing the cultural boundaries, that they were not afraid to talk and chat and to befriend people with whom, maybe, they did not have natural affinities. That is our God. That is our Pentecostal God. When the Spirit came, when the Spirit descended, those men were transformed and they became 'outreach' people. The setting of this speech is not so much an extraordinary phenomenon, a numbers miracle. Rather the setting of this speech is the God who reached out beyond the familiar boundaries, by a novel combination of ministries.

The Spirit is given (14-21)

The Spirit appears from time to time in the Old Testament. The Spirit is seen as the great worker, both in creation and through the prophets, as God seeks to reveal. There were indeed traditional categories for those who receive the Spirit, namely the prophet, the priest and the king. But at Pentecost that is changed, and there is in effect an ordination of the laity. 'I will pour out my spirit on all flesh: your sons and your daughters shall prophesy' (Acts 2: 17-18). No longer is the outpouring of the Spirit confined to special categories within the believing community. Thus Peter, the ex-fisherman, and the others, become a great wonder to the onlookers. Whether they know it or not, they see here something that God had in mind for years and years. Jeremiah, when he taught about the New Covenant (31: 31-34) spoke of the knowledge of God apart from tradition, apart from human instruction: 'and no longer shall each man teach his brother saying "Know the Lord" for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest'. People would no longer have to go to the priest and say 'I want contact with God – can you give me a word from the Lord'. No, 'they shall all know me'. No longer would they overrate the status of the kind of people, 'the divine men', through whom came revelation. 'They shall all know me'. And this was prophesied by Joel as part and parcel of the salvation package (Joel 2: 28-32).

An atomistic approach to scripture divides and splits apart passages which belong together. Luke includes in his quotation from Joel a verse used in another context, by Paul (Romans 10: 13). There Paul quotes 'Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved'. He uses that particular verse as an indication that it is 'the confessing of Jesus Christ'. Calling out to Jesus Christ is the source of salvation. But calling on the name of the Lord as found in Joel is brought out by Peter as part and parcel of the package which includes the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. How do our ministers feel, in practice, on this issue?

Paul claims that the Spirit distributes one gift to one and one gift to another. But the teaching of I Corinthians 12 can give rise to several *cris de couer.* Cries come out in these responses, 'I wish I had a gift at all', 'I don't know what my gifts are'. The real agony of soul at the pastoral level is often not that so-and-so's got that gift, I've got such-and-such a gift, and so on, and so forth. the real agony is this, 'Is the Holy Spirit having any real dealings with me at all? I know what it is to confess Jesus as my Saviour. I know what it is to obey Jesus as my Lord. I know what it is to worship Jesus in the Body of Christ with all the saints. I understand that. but, quite frankly, my main contribution is financial, apart from the fact that I turn up at services. Oh, yes, I do go to the Bible Study and sometimes it is interesting and sometimes, frankly, it is boring'.

Now we have here, in the giving of the Spirit, a mobilisation, a radical mobilisation of people, with which many of our congregations, and maybe some of us reading this, are totally unfamiliar. Many of our candidates in training are in college because they have been sent to learn and be trained. They have been sent for training because they believe themselves inwardly called to the Christian ministry', and the church has said: 'Yes, we also believe that you're called for Christian ministry'. but as for what kind of use the Lord has for them, what kind of talents he has given them, what kind of particular powerful ministry he has to direct them into, this I think is a question both for candidates and trainers alike. And the question can remain when the candidates leave college, just as it was before they came into college. For it may be that the institutional process of our colleges does not bring the question to the surface. But the text is clear, 'Whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved'. And the outcrop of spiritual manifestations in other people should be to both teachers and candidates not a cause of envy and jealousy,

which it can easily become, but it should be for us an encouragement to call upon the name of the Lord and to enter more fully into the wholeness of salvation which God has for each who calls upon him. The giving of the Spirit on all people within the community, the sons and daughters, has implications for Christian ministry. Certainly, there is the implication for everybody who is contemplating ministry and their own role, perspective and deployment within it.

Peter now begins to turn to Christ (vv. 22-42)

Peter leaves the phenomenon and rationale of the outpouring of the Spirit and turns to Christ. It is important at this point to consider briefly how this particular speech has been interpreted. Since C. H. Dodd published his book, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments,* it has become traditional to regard this speech, like most of the other speeches in Acts, as an example of the way in which the early church preached normally. Dodd reached his thesis by looking at the outline of Mark's Gospel and at several significant speeches in Acts. And he saw common elements in Mark and Acts. Because there were common elements, he concluded that there was a stereotype pattern of teaching common in the early church and that Luke has made that pattern the hard core of his speeches.

It is difficult to judge whether Dodd is right or wrong in his analysis, but other scholars, such as Conzelman, have had certain reservations about the thesis because they have seen, common elements apart, that each speech is woven into the overall structure of Luke's thought throughout the whole of his work, his tract on the early church. On stylistic grounds they cannot remove the speeches out from the language of the surrounding texts. They cannot detach them easily on grounds of style. Now, the language of Luke does differ from one place to another. For example, the early part of this speech is more rooted in the Old Testament than, say, Paul's speech at Athens. There are then differences in style dotted here and there in Acts. But overall we cannot simply say that one section of the narrative is clearly in Lukan style, whereas a particular speech definitely is not. The style will not allow us simply to detach the speeches as if they had been inserted as completed pieces before Acts was written as a whole. At this point, therefore, I am sympathetic with the thesis of Conzelman.

As we consider now how Peter preaches Christ here, I want to make a further observation, and build on the first outlined thesis. One of the reasons for choosing this subject for a set of expository articles is that I want to examine not only the relationship between the common pattern of speeches and Luke's overall teaching, but I also want to examine the way in which these speeches are related directly to the situation in which they are paced. There are fundamental elements in these speeches which relate to the historical situation in which they are set (My aim, incidentally, is not to spend time defining Luke historically. The reader is referred to the comments of Howard Marshall and others for that.). By this I mean that the speeches are woven into their context; that each speech fits in with what is going on around the speaker. That to me is the fundamental message about Christian teaching today, and that is why our title is 'Sermons in Acts'. For example, the Pentecost speech is much more than just an example of the early church's basic kerygma.

In the same way, the speech in the house of Cornelius is said by critical scholars like Marshall and Conzelman to be unique, not like any of the other speeches. Again, Paul's speech at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13) is a glorious model of Christian preaching, but it has in it elements that do not quite conform with the early church's preaching as a whole. And Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders at Miletus does not conform at all to the Christian kerygma. However, each one of these speeches is very much related to the context in which it is set – for example, the Pisidian Antioch speech is a speech to Jews. The setting is a synagogue and it is very, very Jewish in its character, although it is set outside Judea. This speech will be considered later in the series.

What I want to note at this point is that as Peter makes his Pentecost speech he is trying to explain to the people around him what is happening before their eyes. This tremendous event has occurred. They come up for the festival, the festival which was celebrated in the old days for the first fruits. By the first century AD it might have been celebrating the covenant between Noah and his people, and certainly in Judiaism today it celebrates the giving of the Torah. But they came up with this expectation to celebrate. And God came down in a most remarkable way, and Peter said, 'I am trying to explain to you what's *happening*'. Now to this process Peter brings the scriptures.

Scripture and Experience – a Method

Peter is presented with a phenomenon. This thing has happened, and he brings the scripture to the phenomenon and asks the radical question, 'Is this of God or is this not of God?' And he is looking at these scriptures in order to confirm that this is of God. His method is a model for our critical activity. Many Christian heresies have arisen from looking at the scriptures and trying to interpret them in the light of our experience. In other words, we come to something difficult in scripture and we look to our own, twentieth-century experience in order to illuminate the ancient event. What is happening around him, and then he looks at the scriptures to see whether it is of God or not. He is bringing the scriptures to bear upon his experience on the premise, of course, that if the scriptures do not support it, then he has to be rather careful about whether

or not he goes forward with it. The movement of his method is this – here is what is happening, let us bring the scriptures to bear on it. And sometimes he quotes the scriptures freely in the process. His handling of the text is not as tight as we would like it to be. There are minor alterations to the text such as 'in the last days' (Act 2: 17) for 'in those days' (Joel 2: 28). But his basic method is to bring the scriptures to bear on what appears to be his situation. this brings him to his Christology.

'Jesus is the answer'

Luke has set the scene: the great surprise. The Holy Spirit has come. Peter has begun his explanation: the phenomenon demonstrates the Kingdom. But 'the miracles' *per se* are not taken to prove that the Kingdom has come. The proof, if it is appropriate to talk of proof, as far as Peter is concerned, is the fact that this person Jesus acted in line with God's full foreknowledge. God knew exactly what he was doing. Jesus was in line with his purposes: he was rejected, he was killed. 'and this person whom you killed', says Peter, *'God raised'*. Now what was the significance of that? Peter's audience, composed of Jews or proselytes (who were culturally Jews), was drawn from all over the world, and he knew what their great expectation was. They were waiting for the coming of the Son of David. They were waiting for the coming of the Messiah. And so Peter says, 'I want you to look at this resurrection in the light of what the Word of God tells us about David'. So it is that he turns to certain passages of scripture and, in particular, Psalm 16: 8-11. There the psalmist looks forward to the holy one of God not experiencing corruption.

Peter quotes, 'For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let thy Holy One see corruption'. His comment is that since David died and was buried, then the text is referring to someone else. Peter, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, is demonstrating that David's real intention was to point to the coming of the one who would not suffer corruption. Later on he turns to Psalm 110 – much beloved of the early church – which talks about David's Lord. And what he is saying is this, 'If you are really going to understand what David is talking about, he was looking forward to the one who would not suffer corruption'. Now it was, apparently, a Jewish belief that the corruption set in after three days in the tomb. On the third day Jesus was raised. He did not suffer corruption. And the resurrection keys in with This great anticipation of the one not suffering corruption. This brings Jesus to the category of the Messiah. Where, then, does this leave his Jewish audience? Here they are: they have come to worship the Lord. They have gone to very great expense. They are very committed people, and now this resurrection – and he refers to witnesses – demonstrates that this Jesus is our Messiah. A sense of remorse now enters the hearts of his audience. Look at the way in which it is described here, verse 37, 'When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and they said to Peter, and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do"?'. Their minds were racing with some such thoughts as this: 'God has raised him from the dead. Here is the one of whom David said that he would not see corruption. This is the Messiah! this is the one we are waiting for! This is the coming one! And what have we done? We have killed him! Brothers, what shall we do?'

I wish that every day, when we are conscious of the sins we have committed, we experienced within the depths of our being that sense of remorse which they experienced then, because in effect we are in no better a state than they when we sin. In a deep sense human sin is a contribution to the crucifixion of Jesus. Because, indeed, had we not sinned, then we would not have needed a saviour. Had we not sinned we would not have needed one to die to atone for us. and there is a sense in which every time you and I sin in thought, or word, or deed we stand with that audience there at Jerusalem, at that feast of Pentecost. We strung him up!

Next, however, they ask the most beautiful question a human being can ever ask. it is the question that indicates that the Holy Spirit, not human pride, is at work. Paul does not always get the reaction to his preaching that Peter got this day. Sometimes the reaction Paul received was rejection. The Jews of Thessalonica hounded him out of town. Indeed, they were so furious that they chased him to Berea and made it impossible for him to stay there as well. the reaction was not always the reaction of the regenerating Spirit of God. It was sometimes the reaction of the human heart that is furious and angry when its sinfulness is exposed. But on this occasion the Spirit worked repentance. And the question they asked was: 'Brothers, what shall we do? We have received the message. What shall we do?' The answer comes very clearly: 'Repent and be baptised 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'.

Sometimes this speech is regarded as anti-Semitic. Obviously, we Christians cannot afford to be insensitive to events like Auschwitz. Sometimes, however, any criticism of the part of the Jewish people in the crucifixion, particularly in the Acts of the Apostles, is regarded as anti-Semitism *per se*. And that cannot be true. Look at what Luke writes at verse 39: 'The promise is for you, and your children'. What is happening here is not a rejection of the covenant. The Spirit of God is not putting the covenant with Israel on one side. God is not writing of Israel because they killed the Messiah. All these things have happened to bring them the promised Spirit. This is the covenant coming alive, the Jeremiah covenant coming into its own. This is for Israel.

Another prayer that I would make for myself – and, I trust, yourselves – is this. That when we seek to share to Gospel with other people we would be rid of that defensive sense of aggression which is so easy to introduce. That desire that we have in our nature somehow to demonstrate their wrongness and our rightness. It's a very easy theme to introduce. Almost as if we hate the people's we're ministering to, that we want them to change and then we'll love them. it is totally foreign to what is going on here. This is good news. Peter can see their broken hearts. He can see they're cut to the quick. This is for you and for your children and my prayer for you, as for me, as we seek to share the gospel with our contemporaries is this – that we will see the Gospel is for them. It's not us trying to make them like us. The Gospel is for them. It says that God is interested in them. We have received the blessing and our prayer must be that this self-same blessing will be theirs, too.
