

Pentecost Sunday / May 19, 2024

Acts 2:1-21

“But this is what was uttered by the prophet Joel: ‘And in the last days I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh...I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below...And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”

Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved.

Pentecost falls on the 50th day after Passover and commemorates the giving of the law to Moses, approximately fifty days after the first Passover and Israel’s exodus from Egypt. Pentecost was one of the three feasts all Jews were obligated to observe as members of the covenant community. The other two were Passover and the Feast of Booths, following the gathering of the harvest at the end of the year. Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks, counting seven weeks from Passover, drew worshippers from throughout the Roman world. Jews of the dispersion as well as converts to Judaism from the nations, flooded Jerusalem. This is attested to in our text from Acts, in which people from a wide array of language groups hear the church proclaiming the wonders of God each in their own language.

The Lord commanded the observance of these feasts as a sign of faithfulness to the covenant of Mount Sinai. It’s worth noting that much had changed since the Lord, through Moses, commanded Israel to keep these feasts. The most notable change was that Israel was no longer simply a nation in one location, but had become a people spread throughout many nations. In Old Testament times Israel as a nation and a people of faith, was contained within Israel as a geographical area. Because of the dispersion of the northern tribes in 722 BC and the subsequent exile of the southern tribe Judah in 586 BC, there were Israelites throughout the ancient near east in practically every nation under heaven.

Out of two cataclysmic events that seemed to spell the end of Israel as a nation and as a people of faith, God planted the seeds of faith throughout the ancient near east that would germinate in the Christian Church, beginning with Pentecost. Through the children of Israel scattered among the nations, God brought His word to the nations. God brought the nations to Jerusalem on the first Christian Pentecost to hear the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus’ name from the lips of Peter and the church. The Holy Spirit opened their eyes to look, their ears to listen and their hearts to believe Jesus is the Messiah. When they returned to their homes the Holy Spirit empowered them to tell their friends, family and fellow citizens the good news about Jesus and the promise that everyone who calls on His Name will be saved.

Peter was appointed by the Lord to speak to the crowd of Jews and converts to Judaism on Pentecost Sunday. The crowd was attracted by the phenomena of hearing a group of Galileans speaking in each of their native tongues. Having got their attention, the Holy Spirit inspired Peter to tell the people the good news of Jesus and the salvation that comes through faith in His name. Pentecost is sometimes referred to as the birth of the Christian Church in distinction from the Old Testament Church of Israel. This is not accurate. There is no distinction between the Church of the New and Old Testaments; except that the Church of the Old Testament proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, while the Church of the New Testament proclaims that the Messiah has come in the person of Jesus. Peter quotes an Old Testament prophet to show that Jesus is the Messiah and that everyone who calls on His name will be saved. Rather than the beginning of the Church, Pentecost is the beginning of the Church proclaiming the good news of forgiveness and life in Jesus’ name and offering salvation for all to receive through faith in Him.

God’s purpose in the Church of the Old Testament was the same as His purpose in the New Testament, to make Himself known as the only God and Saviour of all peoples. He created Israel as His special people, so that through them, He would make Himself and His salvation known in the world. Israel was to be separate from the nations in terms of their worship and faith, but Israel was to call all people to share in their faith and worship the true God, who made heaven, the earth and all that is in them. In this regard ancient Israel largely failed, routinely giving into the beliefs and practices of the nations around them. However, there were some notable successes. Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, became a believer when the Lord healed him of leprosy through Elisha the prophet. Rahab believed the Lord and helped the army of Israel capture Jericho. Most notably, Ruth from Moab married an Israelite man, embraced the faith of Israel, became the great-grandmother of King David and the ancestor of Jesus according to His human nature. God’s purposes through Israel moved slowly in the Old Testament period, but they kicked into high gear with the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Church in Jerusalem

on the day of Pentecost. Israel, the people who live with God by faith in His promises, increased exponentially as men, children and women from every nation under heaven heard the good news about salvation in Jesus and believed in Him as their God and Saviour.

Peter chose as his text on the day of Pentecost, verses from the Old Testament Prophet Joel, who proclaimed the coming of the Day of the Lord, widely perceived to be a day of reckoning for ancient Israel's enemies. God knows the best way to destroy enemies is to make them friends. God destroyed His enemies by taking away the sin of the world and reconciling all people to Himself through the cross of Jesus. God makes Jews and Gentiles one people through the reconciliation that is in Christ Jesus. Jews and Gentiles are one people, Israel through faith in Jesus and baptism in His name. God reconciles the nations to Himself by making them members of His people through faith in Jesus and baptism into His death and resurrection. He is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.

Joel spoke of amazing signs in the heavens and on the earth that would herald the arrival of the Day of the Lord. He said, "I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood." An amazing thing happened on the day of Pentecost when people from every nation in the Roman world heard the church proclaim the wonders of God in their own native language. But most amazing of all is the growth, resilience and longevity of the church throughout the ages. Jesus told Peter and the disciples, "On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hades will not overcome it." The rock is His word, especially the word that proclaims Him God and Saviour. The work of the church is to proclaim His word, especially the word of salvation through faith in Jesus' name.

God built His church in Old and New Testament times, on the firmest of foundations, His Holy Word. God spoke His word through people with some powerful personalities, but the power was His word. The first thing the Lord did when He brought Israel out of Egypt and made them His people, was to speak His word to them through Moses. God spoke to Israel in the days leading up to Jesus through His servants the prophets. Through His word, God caused Israel to believe. By His word, God ensured that some in Israel always believed. At a time of great apostasy when it seemed all Israel had fallen away, the Lord assured the prophet Elijah that He still reserved seven thousand in Israel who believed.

The first thing the Holy Spirit did after Jesus rose and ascended into heaven, was to speak His word to the nations gathered in Jerusalem through Peter. Peter spoke the word of Jesus. That He is Lord. That He gave His life as the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world, even the sin of rejecting, condemning, cursing and crucifying Him. Peter's words, or rather the Lord's words through Peter, were not without effect. When Peter finished speaking three thousand were convicted of their sins, confessed Jesus as Lord and were baptized in His Name. Pentecost is the beginning of the Holy Spirit speaking through the church the offer of salvation and the promise that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved in time and for eternity.

Christian Pentecost was accompanied by signs and wonders. We ooh and ahh when we see signs and wonders, but the power of Pentecost is the Holy Spirit working through the word to open eyes to see Jesus as the Christ, opening minds to believe and hearts to receive Him as their God and Saviour. Through Joel, God said He would do wondrous things to open peoples' eyes so they would stop, look and listen to His word. The most wondrous thing God has done is to give His only begotten Son to live as one of us, die in our place for our sins and rise for our salvation. The most important thing we can do is listen to God's word in Christ Jesus, see Him as our Saviour, believe in Him our hearts and share with others the word that everyone who calls on His name will be saved. In His Name Amen.