

Easter 6
17/5/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 10:44 - 48

Psalm 98

1 John 5:1 - 6

John 15:9 – 17

It all happens in the sermon

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

The opening verse from the Acts reading:

‘While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word’

Where the lectionary decides to start and stop a reading is sometimes a problem. Today is a case in point, at least with regard to this passage. For it disregards the *content* of what Peter is saying, referring only to *the fact* of his speaking. Nor can we fall back on remembering what immediately precedes this verse, since we have skipped two chapters since the Acts passage before us last week.

So it is crucial to take actual account of Peter’s words if we are to understand this mysterious, totally unanticipated event that occurs while he speaks, namely that ‘the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word’.

So here is something of what he said that brought about such an extraordinary phenomenon:

‘You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power We are witnesses to all that he did, both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all, but us who were chosen as witnesses. ... He commanded us to preach to the people that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’

And then follows our verse: “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word”.

At the very least this tells us how crucial a sermon can be. For far from thinking that the sermon is merely a secondary, incidental utterance **about** the gospel - as if we have some sort of separation, or hiatus, between them, with the gospel over here, and the sermon, a less than necessary detachable or optional extra over there – we find, on the contrary, that the sermon is actually a **participation** in the Gospel itself. So we hear that what happened to Jesus in his baptism - the coming of the Spirit - happens *in the sermon* to the hearers themselves in just the same way.

‘While Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell....’, we are told, not ‘After Peter finished speaking’, as some sort of subsequent concluding outcome.

Imagine that! In our culture that detests the very word ‘preaching’, and in a Church where the sermon can be something of a mystery both to preachers and congregations, this is a significant claim indeed. It tells us that we can never have too high a doctrine of preaching. Historically, of course, the denominations, which those of us of a certain age grew up in, were founded on just this basis. We recall how this and other churches of similar vintage placed the pulpit centrally, usually ‘high and lifted up’, or we recall how congregations were spoken of as ‘preaching places’, or of how the pulpit was floodlit, the congregation remaining in the dark – a frighteningly ambiguous symbol surely!

At any rate, over the years something has happened. Expectations have grown dim. Experiences of preaching are frequently unprofitable, and even our awareness of what the sermon really is has become clouded.

So the question raised by our text for us is: why did these first hearers experience such a life shattering change, all the more extraordinary given that the imagery of the sermon was not immediately accessible to Gentile hearers? But even for Jews where language of this sort was not unknown, it had never before been employed in such a radical way.

For example, in the passage omitted by the Lectionary, two crucial metaphors are present in Peter’s words: the coming of the Holy Spirit to Jesus at his baptism, and the testimony to his ‘being raised on the third day’.

If we are to grasp what is at stake here, we need to know that as far as the hearers were concerned, both of these events were understood to be possible only as occurrences at the **end** of history, not in its present unfolding.

Just a couple of texts by way of support.

With regard to the Spirit, we recall the prophet Joel:

‘The days are coming, says the Lord when I will pour out my spirit on all flesh’.

‘The days are coming’ is coded language for ‘the last days’. The point is that what should happen tomorrow with regard to the Spirit is in fact happening in the today of Peter’s sermon. In his preaching, future hope is breaking into the present.

Then, with regard to the word of resurrection, its first anticipatory reference is found in Daniel 12, written closer to the time of our text than most. Listen to this from verse 7:

‘At that time ...many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt’.

Much would need to be said about this text, but here it is sufficient merely to underline the significance of the phrase ‘at that time’, linked as it is to concepts of resurrection. ‘Resurrection’, then, was understood to be for some time in the future. Imagine the astonishment – indeed the inconceivability - at the claim that Jesus was already raised. This meant that a future was already coming about in the appearing of Jesus in everyday history after his death. We can say that in this claim Jesus, in fact, experiences today what really belongs to tomorrow.

Such a novelty, of course, confirms his preaching, since his parables of the Kingdom of God are word events appropriate to tomorrow, but now being invoked in his preaching. Which, of course, is why we pray in his prayer: ‘Your kingdom come’. That is, we too are summoned to demand of God: let tomorrow happen today.

This is why I say that Peter's sermon is truly shocking. Without something of this background, the words of today's text lose their sting. It's not as if any old sermon about something happening in the past would bring about the coming of the Spirit - only this quite specific utterance about Holy Spirit and resurrection serves to bring an otherwise remote future into the present moment.

The truth is that, in Peter's sermon, for these outsider Gentiles tomorrow happens today. The Spirit of the risen One brings a new world to birth for the hearers: inconceivably, they are already being included in the promises.

So the future is coming to the present;
which is to say that;
the previously unbelieving culture - the uncircumcised Gentiles - now as new believers are being swept up into the new age;
which is to say that:
the Holy Spirit falls on all 'who hear the word'.

All of which raises a question to us: do we expect such a revolution of the commonplace in our sermons? Think of the universal demand that preaching must above all be relevant. Imagine if Peter's hearers had demanded such a sermon; as if they not only knew in advance what they wanted to hear in a sermon, but were of a mind to judge its present relevance.

Our question then is this: how can the radically new break into our lives if the everyday banal clichés about 'religion' are to be the arbiters of truth?;

or if what we now experience as our limits are to be the judge of the relevance of another world struggling to be born in us?;

or if the claims of these texts must always be answerable to the demands of today's culture?

So let me be mildly provocative. Let me propose that what we all need is irrelevant preaching, that is to say, that we need a word which summons a world which left to ourselves we would have no inkling about, but a world which would be so much more relevant, indeed much richer, than the daily round that falls to our lot.

This morning, again, we discover here something of crucial significance, not only for those of us who try to preach, but especially for you who have to endure Sunday by Sunday our meagre offerings. Today we learn something radically instructive for both preachers as well as hearers. And it is this. That the point of Christian preaching is not, as is usually imagined, designed to bridge a gap between a past 'then and there' and a present 'here and now'. If this were the case, not only would we miss the point, but we will forever be destined to experience an increasingly painful case of the splits, as the biblical world recedes ever faster into oblivion.

No - on the contrary, preacher and hearers are called to insinuate something radically novel - to invoke a tomorrow for today - a world seeking to be born for us and in us that is more truly relevant than any we can otherwise construct.

All of which means that the point of the gospel and the church is not the impossible task of becoming relevant to the world. The point of the Gospel and the church is to make the present world relevant to the gospel. This, friends, is the crunch. What we are about here is making the everyday relevant to the gospel. We are not called to the impossible task of making the gospel relevant to the vanity fair of the world's presuppositions.

If only we knew what a missionary revolution of this order calls for, or even that this is the real mandate - that, just for once, the gospel might be allowed to reclaim priority for the much abused word 'relevance'.

At the very least, this is what it would mean to preach, and to hear, a sermon like Peter's.

And as Pentecost draws near, this is what it would mean for the Holy Spirit to fall upon us.

So - not to put to fine a point on it - our last word must be this:

It all happens - in the sermon.