



The Adventure of Faith - Preach the Bible! - Acts 13:13-15,26-43 Sunday 20th May 2018

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Bishop Michael Curry's 13 minute preach at the Royal Wedding might have been too impassioned for some of the royals but it certainly got a very warm reception on social media. Piers Morgan tweeted 'I love this guy', Ed Milliband said 'Rev Michael Curry could almost make me a believer'. To an audience of millions, he shared how the redemptive power of love can change the world. He said 'An old spiritual may suggest why: 'If you cannot preach like Peter, And you cannot pray like Paul, You can tell the love of Jesus, How he died to save us all. There is a balm in Gilead, To make the wounded whole; There is a balm in Gilead, To heal the sin sick soul. Just tell the love of Jesus, how he died to save us all.' How wonderful to have the name of Jesus honoured in public.

He concluded by saying this: 'If humanity ever captured the power of love, it would be the second time we have discovered FIRE.'

And I thought to myself 'it's Pentecost weekend, the fire is here!' The coming of the Holy Spirit already ignited that new fire of God's love and power!

The power to love was thrust out of the doors into the streets of Jerusalem on that first Pentecost Sunday as the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and declared the wonders of God in different languages. When Peter preached his message about Jesus, his listeners were cut to the heart because their hearts were exposed to the fire. They cried out 'what shall we do?', desperate for the balm of Gilead; spiritual medicine that could cure their souls.

Whilst I suspect that many in the world might agree that we all need to love, how many would actually agree that the challenge begins with us, that we can only possibly change through believing the life transforming message of Jesus. How many would listen to an exhortation to love one another and conclude that it is me that needs to repent and ask for God's grace to change my ways and thinking?

Pentecost unleashed that fire that exposes the heart. John 16v8 says 'when he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment.' So whilst I pray that Bishop Curry's message inspires people to love one another, my deeper prayer is that actually that call to love will carry with it conviction and a thirst for the salvation that only faith in Jesus Christ can offer. The need for personal and corporate salvation has been a key theme of the church's preaching ever since the earliest days of the church following the tumultuous events at Pentecost. As soon as the disciples began to preach in Jerusalem signs and wonders followed on. In Acts 4, we read how after healing a lame beggar in the name of Jesus, Peter was arrested and tried before the Jewish ruling council. But he declared 'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.'

Then as we have followed Paul's adventure of faith, we see how he and Barnabas were sent out by the Holy Spirit to proclaim this same message about Jesus as they travelled. Last week we saw how he changed his name from Saul, taking his Roman name so he could relate culturally to local people. Paul soon discovered that he could trust the Holy Spirit to back him up with power when he confronted opposition. But now in the next instalment, Paul and his companions journey from Cyprus to what is now modern-day Turkey. For some reason John Mark leaves the group to return home – perhaps he didn't get on with Paul very well or maybe he was homesick, but it took a good number of years and Barnabas'

encouragement to get Paul and John to reconcile. Ministry is tough and sometimes things don't always go to plan. But let's read the story of Paul's preach at Pisidian Antioch:

Acts 13 - In Pisidian Antioch

¹³ From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵ After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, 'Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak.'

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²⁶ 'Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. ²⁷ The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognise Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. ²⁸ Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. ²⁹ When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead, ³¹ and for many days he was seen by those who had travelled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

³² 'We tell you the good news: what God promised our ancestors ³³ he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: "You are my son; today I have become your father." ³⁴ God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said, "I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David." ³⁵ So it is also stated elsewhere: "You will not let your holy one see decay." ³⁶ 'Now when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. ³⁷ But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. ³⁸ 'Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. ³⁹ Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses. ⁴⁰ Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: ⁴¹ "Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'" ⁴² As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. ⁴³ When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

As it is Pentecost I might sometimes talk about the wonderful manifestations of the power of the Holy Spirit, like signs, wonders and miracles. But I think we can sometimes get so caught up in the manifestations that we lose focus on the message they follow. As the reformed theologian RC Sproul taught before he died last year: The power of the Holy Spirit is mediated first and foremost through the preaching of the Word of God.

As Paul preached at Pisidian we see the clarity and challenge of the Gospel message. It is not simply the message that we love one another, but that whole life transformation begins with belief and faith in Jesus Christ:

³⁸ 'Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. ³⁹ Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.

This is the first time we hear Paul preach and develop the language of the message that would define the logic of the Gospel for 2000 years. The essence of the gospel is this: Forgiveness of sin through belief in Jesus brings freedom and justification before God.

As I have journeyed with Paul over these last weeks and as I read Acts it is absolutely clear that the power of the Gospel starts first and foremost with the forgiveness of sins. When Jesus healed the paralysed man brought to him on a stretcher by four friends, he said 'Son your sins are forgiven.'. Sin is not a popular word in our culture which is why I was glad Michael Curry mentioned the word yesterday in his Royal wedding talk. For most people, sin is something our ancestors did, or perhaps it is overindulging in chocolate.

Some have declared that we are living in a 'sinless society' – or at least a society that has no clue that we are all sinners in need of a saviour. I went for a haircut on Friday and the barber said he was 'surprised there are still so many churches, as people don't worry about getting married or anything and it's fine to live together and do what you want.'

Well it may be legal to do what you want. It may be socially normal to do what you want, but I fear that the root sin of pleasing ourselves and sidelining God is growing bigger every day. Sin is not just about what we do – fundamentally it is about unbelief and not taking God at his word.

Because no-one can be saved by a God they don't believe in. If we don't understand the dark depths we need saving from, then we can't truly appreciate the heights of the love of God in the cross of Christ. Let me play a little video by John Piper which explains the seriousness of sin:

*Sin is the glory of God not honored
The holiness of God not revered.
The greatness of God not admired.
The power of God not praised.
The truth of God not sought.
The wisdom of God not esteemed.
The beauty of God not treasured.
The goodness of God not savored.
The faithfulness of God not trusted.*

The promises of God not believed.
The commandments of God not obeyed.
The justice of God not respected.
The wrath of God not feared.
The grace of God not cherished.
The presence of God not prized.
The person of God not loved.

Sin is what you do when your heart is not satisfied with God.

Why is it that people become so emotionally and morally indignant over poverty, exploitation, prejudice, abortion, infractions of our religious liberty, manifold injustices of man to man and feel little or no remorse or indignation or outrage that God is disregarded, disbelieved, disobeyed, dishonoured and thus belittled by millions and millions and millions of his creatures. Sin is ultimately against God.

Mims was out outside on Friday trying to tackle some of the 'Pendulous Sedge' - tough grassy reeds that are gradually taking over the whole garden. I had told her I was thinking about Sin and Salvation preparing for this sermon, and she said 'well it's like these weeds – you need to deal with them at the roots.' (her emphasis was definitely on *You* there I noted!) And then I read this quote by Rosaria Butterfield: 'We must never repent of sin in surface ways, like weeding our gardens by snipping the tops off the Dandelions. When we do this we deceive ourselves and risk hardening our hearts to God's kind call. For it is 'the kindness of God that leads to repentance' (Romans 2:4). Yet I know that like my Garden, without expert help, we cannot shift the weeds of sin that spread and suffocate all that is good and beautiful that should be growing in our lives.

We need a saviour. And thankfully God is the master gardener. Jesus severed the deep roots of sin and death and sickness when he died on the cross. He condemned them to hell where they belong and now he can come and bring forgiveness if we will admit him to the garden of our lives.

It is not the absence of sin that makes you a believer. It is the presence of Christ in the midst of your struggle that commends the believer and sets you apart in the world.

It's what Paul and Barnabas called 'continuing in the Grace of God' in verse 43.

He can bring beauty out of brokenness, healing out of woundedness, forgiveness out of chaos. Our job is to hear him knocking at the gate, take him at his word and come and let him do what he loves to do.