



# **Beckenham Baptist Church**

A CARING CHRISTIAN CHURCH AT THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY

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## **Bible Reading Notes**

### **April 2010**



## **HE IS NOT HERE,**

## **HE IS RISEN**

### **A Series of Easter Meditations**

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# **'HE IS NOT HERE, HE IS RISEN'**

## **A Series of Easter Meditations**

The church is now over 2000 years old. As Christians alive during the twenty first century, we have all the resources of church history to draw on. What a rich and varied heritage it is! We are now living through the demise of Christendom, which started with the 'conversion' of Emperor Constantine in AD 313, and the church in Britain finds itself on the margins of society. During the Christendom centuries the church was at the centre, a dominant influence in religion, politics, economics, culture and daily life. We could look back wistfully on the good old days and long for a mighty revival that will restore the church to its powerful central position. But Christendom demanded a high price and did not always offer the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. People were coerced into church attendance and alternative views were not tolerated. We are, as a church, rightly concerned with engaging with our post-Christian culture but there is much to be learned by looking at the approaches taken in the past.

There is a rise in interest today in spirituality, even though this is often not prepared to exist within the confines of the moral and ethical limitations of Christianity. People, however, are still fascinated by the person of Jesus Christ, even if they have no time for the institutional church. As the church today tries to adapt to our changing context, we need to avail ourselves of the wealth of resources and the depth of historical Christian spirituality and understanding. Christian Spirituality is global and means a style of walking in the Holy Spirit. There are several distinct streams of spirituality and they obviously overlap. These include Evangelical, Contemplative, Charismatic, Radical and Celtic. Whichever stream means the most to us as individuals is determined not only by our theology but more significantly, by our personality.

Evangelical spirituality incorporates the emphases of Evangelicalism. This is a form of Christianity which is committed to the great themes of the traditional Christian faith. These include the following:

- a focus, both devotional and theological, on the person of Jesus Christ, especially his death on the cross;
- the identification of Scripture as the ultimate authority in matters of spirituality, doctrine and ethics;
- an emphasis on conversion or a 'new birth' as a life changing religious experience;
- a concern for sharing the faith, especially through evangelism.

Scripture is of central importance in evangelical spirituality and emphasises the daily 'quiet time' , a period set aside for reading and meditating on Scripture. It is the way in which the scriptures are related that can involve other methods and include influences from other Christian traditions to keep it fresh and alive to us.

This series of bible studies is designed as a 'walk through the Easter story'. It includes some of the key events surrounding the events of that first Easter. Each day there is a portion of one of the Gospels to read and comments given to bring certain aspects of the story to life. This is a important dimension to Ignatian spirituality. The idea is to take time to enter in to the story, the different characters involved and the key message using the imagination to experience the sights, sounds, smells and most of all the emotions of people in the situations contained in the readings. The notes are not theological explanations or expositions of the text but thoughts and pointers. You may find that other aspects of the story speak to you, with a particular text that is not commented on leaping out at you. What is important is to read, meditate and pray, open to the Holy Spirit's leading and ready, willing and able to put into practice in our life that which He applies directly to us. So let God speak to you personally through his word and live through the Easter events with Jesus and his first disciples.

**Jim & Julia Binney**

**February 2010**

Thursday 1st April 2010

# GETHSEMANE

Luke 22:39-53

After a last supper with his disciples Jesus goes up to the Mount of Olives to pray and his disciples follow him. The Mount of Olives is a ridge about a mile long, separated from Jerusalem by the Kidron valley. The place was called Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36), an olive grove on the lower slopes (John 18:1). Jesus went there to fight his lonely battle. He was only thirty-three - who wants to die at that age? He would have seen enough crucifixions to know what it was like. Surely there was another way?

Did he really have to take this particular cup—the cup of suffering (v. 42)? In the Old Testament, the cup of wine was a common metaphor for God's wrath against human sin and rebellion (Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:17-23; Jeremiah 25:15-28). Jesus knew he had to drink from this cup (Mark 10:38), the cup which refers to divine punishment of sins, which he bore in place of sinful humanity. Jesus had to take this cup from the Father to fulfil his mission. It is not so much the physical torture, pain and death which causes his anguish but the taking on himself the sin of the whole world (1 John 2:2). Sometimes we experience the weight on ourselves of our own sin and that not in total as it maybe only one particular sin causing the pressure. What must it have felt like for Jesus to bear all my sin, the sins I have committed, am committing and am yet to commit. It must have been horrendous. But it wasn't only my sin, it was your sin as well and everybody's sin. No wonder in his agony, his sweat was like drops of blood. There is a condition called haematidrosis, that when someone is under extreme stress, they do actually sweat drops of blood as the blood mixes with the sweat. We can never really begin to imagine the deep pain and breathtaking sorrow that Jesus must have experienced in the garden of Gethsemane.

He could have failed, he could have let the cup pass from him. He prays that it would. This is the moment, the centre of the battle for the universe for all eternity. The salvation of the whole world hangs in the balance. It all depends on Jesus. An angel comes to strengthen him (v. 44). This is the turning point. Every fibre and cell in his body is fighting against it—'yet not my will but yours be done.' And so it begins, (vs. 47-53).

**Prayer: Lord, help me understand it, help me to take it in, what it meant to you the Holy One, to take away my sin.**

**Friday 2nd April 2010**  
**THE CRUCIFIXION**  
**Luke 22:66-23:49**

Jesus is arrested whilst in Gethsemane and is taken before the High Priest. Throughout the night, he is taunted and beaten by the soldiers. At dawn on that first Good Friday he is led before the Council. They accuse him of blasphemy (22:70). This is not enough for the civil courts to issue a death warrant so they charge him with political subversion (23:2). It is total nonsense but even though Pilate wants to release him, they want Barabbas instead. The whole situation was crazy. Yet somehow in the midst of it all—the humiliation and jibes of Herod and his soldiers, the false accusations of the chief priests, the shouts of crucify from the crowd, the serene presence of Jesus rises above all human chaos (Is 53:7).

They lead him away. The cross is laid on his shoulders and he is marched to the place of crucifixion, Golgotha (John 19:17). There they crucify him, along with the criminals - one on his right, the other on his left (v. 33). His arms were stretched out on the cross bar and nails driven through his hands. His feet were not nailed but loosely bound to the cross. Half way up Jesus' weight was taken by the saddle, a projecting piece of wood or the nails would have simply torn through his hands. The cross is lifted and set upright in its socket. Thoughts of the pain he must have endured make us nauseous. Yet he prays 'Father forgive them' (23:34). There are no thoughts of self pity or revenge but the triumph over all such 'natural' emotion by the victory of perfect love. It would have been 'natural' for Jesus to have felt remote from the two thieves crucified with him but Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). There could be no salvation for the unrepentant thief, but the other man who, knowing his need of salvation cries out to Jesus, 'Lord, remember me, and in response hears Jesus' compassionate response—today, you will be with me in paradise.'

When finally Jesus died it was as if the sun was ashamed to shine. Darkness came over the whole earth (23:44,45). The centurion's eyes, however, are opened and he affirms to all, *Surely this was the Son of God*, (Matt 27:54).

**Prayer: Lord, help us to truly turn to you and know that one day we will be with you in glory. May we too proclaim you as Son of God, Saviour!**

**Saturday 3rd April 2010**

# **THE BURIAL**

**Luke 23:50-56**

Jesus died at about three o'clock and the Sabbath began at 6 p.m. There was no time to lose. One disciple, Joseph of Arimathaea, knew what to do. He had a tomb ready and prepared for a burial—perhaps his own. He got permission to retrieve the corpse from the cross and lay it in the tomb. Usually bodies of criminals were not buried at all but left to the dogs and the vultures to dispose of. This man saved Jesus' body from such a fate.

Joseph of Arimathaea was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council, a man of some standing and influence who didn't agree with the verdict and sentence of the court (v. 51). Did he say anything at the time? Did he argue in Jesus' defence? If so there is no record. Did he stay silent and let Jesus be falsely accused? May be he had an opportunity and should have defended Jesus and spoken out but he didn't take it. His guilt must have weighed heavy on him, like the psalmist—'When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped' (Psalm 32:3,4).

'The Sabbath was about to begin' (v. 54). Everybody stopped work, all the essential cooking was done, and every devout Jew prepared to spend the next twenty-four hours in worship and meditation. This is why the women only had enough time to see where the body was laid and go home to prepare spices and ointments before work became illegal. On this particular Sabbath the disciples rested 'according to the commandment' (v. 56). They did what they had always been taught to do, little knowing that this was the last Sabbath that they would ever observe. This Sabbath is a turning-point, because it marks the end of the old dispensation and the beginning of the new. The day on which God rested was to be superseded by the day on which God acted, the 'day of the Lord' in which he 'led captivity captive' and opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers (Psalm 68:18). So, after the strain and agony of the last few days, a stillness descends upon the city of God. Jesus lies dead in the tomb, and the people of God are at rest.

**Prayer: Lord, help us to take time to contemplate this part of the Easter Story—to sense deep within that Christ is buried, and our sin with him.**

**Sunday 4th April 2010**  
**THE EMPTY TOMB**  
**Luke 24:1-12**

The Jewish Sabbath is a Saturday, the last day of the week, and it marks the rest of God after the work of creation (Genesis 2:2,3). Sunday is the first day of the week and for the Christian it commemorates the Resurrection of Jesus. On this first Christian Sunday, the women went out to the tomb to offer their final service by embalming and anointing Jesus' body with the spices they had prepared. Tombs were usually a carved out cave from the rock. The body was wrapped in linen strips and laid on a shelf in the rock tomb. The tomb was then closed by a great circular stone which ran along a groove across the opening. When the women came, the stone was rolled away. Who could have done such a thing and why? Imagine the thoughts that must have been racing through the minds of these women as they see the open tomb. We are told in Matthew 27:62-66 that the chief priests and the Pharisees suspected that Jesus' body might be stolen by his followers so Pilate sealed the tomb and posted a guard to secure it. What had happened to Jesus' body?

'Suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them' (v. 4). They looked like men but their clothes were like Jesus' at his Transfiguration (9:29) and the men in shining clothes (Acts 1:10; 10:30). The gospel records differ a little here. In Mark the messenger in the tomb is a young man in a long white robe (Mark 16:5); in Matthew he is the Angel of the Lord (Matthew 28:2); and in John, it is two angels (John 20:12). No two people ever recount stories the same and for a long time the Gospel stories were spread orally until they were eventually written down. The main fact remains—the tomb was empty. No wonder the women were frightened (v. 5). After all the events surrounding the death of Jesus their nerves were in shreds and they must have been emotionally drained. They lie prostrate on the ground with fear, transfixed, unable to move or run away. As they lie there the angels ask them the most incredible question—Why do you look for the living among the dead?

**Prayer: Lord, help us, in our mind's eye, to visit that empty tomb and recognise again—wonder of wonders—that you are risen from the dead, triumphant over Satan, sin and death!**

**Monday 5th April 2010**

# **HE IS RISEN**

**Matthew 28:1-10**

The angel speaks with calming reassurance - *Do not be afraid* (v.5). All the women's fears are slowly replaced by a dawning revelation of the incredible truth that the angel starts to explain to them. The angel reminds them of the promise of Jesus and confronts them with the empty tomb. The thing was so staggering, beyond belief. Could it really be true? 'He is not here, he has risen.' This little phrase is the very core of our faith. It changes everything. Jesus is alive. 'Christ is risen, he is risen indeed'.

Karl Heim, a theologian-scientist from Germany recounts an incident that occurred in Moscow shortly after the Russian revolution and was reported in the German press. One of the frequent mass meetings was taking place, attended by many workers. The leader announced at the beginning of the meeting that complete freedom of speech would be given, but that the addresses must be kept short. Many speeches were delivered, and they all expounded the stock arguments for the materialistic view of the world and the victory of the classless proletariat. When all had spoken, the leader asked whether any wished to represent the other side, since they had promised free discussion. A little, undernourished priest mounted the platform. While he was climbing the steps, the leader of the meeting called out, 'Only five minutes, please!' 'I won't need five minutes for what I have to say', replied the priest. Then he addressed the crowd. 'You have heard all the arguments which have been brought forward to prove the new world view. But my friends CHRIST IS RISEN!' One might have expected a howl of laughter to greet the cry but it did not come. Those workers had heard that cry many times. It occurs at the climax of the Russian Easter night service, when the mourning and fasting is ended and the presiding priest proclaims the good news, 'Christ is risen'. The people embrace one another and call out in reply, 'He is risen indeed'. On this occasion as the priest sent forth the ancient cry, it was as though a sleeping volcano erupted, from thousands of throats there burst forth the response, 'HE IS RISEN INDEED!'

**Prayer: Lord, despite our situations and circumstances, whether life is good or difficult for us right here, right now, help us to recognise that 'Christ is risen' ... and therefore everything is different.**

**Tuesday 6th April 2010**

# **IN THE GARDEN**

**John 20:10-18**

John's Gospel has the women rushing back to tell the disciples that Jesus' body is missing and two angels appear to Mary who was left by the tomb. It was believed that the spirit of a dead person hovered around the tomb for three days until it departed. Mary Magdalene was in a state of bewilderment and shock. She assumed that the tomb had been broken into and the body of Jesus stolen. Mary loved Jesus so much—she loved much for she had been forgiven much (Luke 7:36-50). She had been delivered from seven demons (Luke 8:2). Now she is sitting by the tomb alone, crying. She becomes aware that somebody is standing behind her. She wheels round to see who it is.

It is Jesus! It is to Mary that belongs the glory of being the first one to see the Risen Christ but she didn't recognise him. She doesn't even give him a second glance, thinking he must be the gardener because it was very early in the morning during the festival week (v.1). She bombards him with questions. The desperation of her voice can be sensed from her words (v. 15). The stunning revelation takes place—'Jesus said to her, "Mary"'. She recognised his voice, the way he always said her name. She looks at him more closely and cries out 'Rabboni!' which means 'Teacher' (v.16). This word seems to capture all the love and faith and joy which must have flooded into her heart and mind at that moment. The shepherd had called his sheep by name, and the sheep heard and joyfully responded (10:3). Mary is reunited with her beloved Lord after she thought she had lost him forever. She must have tried to reach out to him because of his response of 'do not touch me' (v. 17). In Matthew 28:9 we are told that the women 'came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him.' This may be what is alluded to here by John, as it was an Eastern custom. Mary prostrates herself before the Lord and tries to clasp his feet as an act of joyful adoration. May be she just wanted to cling on to him so there would be no fear that she may lose him again. Jesus instructs her to tell the others. She rushes to them with the most wonderful news: 'I have seen the Lord!'

**Prayer: Lord, help us recognise you when you come to us. We know that you are always with us but we thank you for those special times when your presence is undeniable. Help us to lay our lives at your feet.**

**Wednesday 7th April 2010**  
**THE ROAD TO EMMAUS**  
**Luke 24:13-32**

Two people, two disciples of Jesus, possibly husband and wife, Cleopas and Mrs Cleopas (v. 18), are trudging wearily home from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a small village some seven miles from Jerusalem. It is late in the afternoon on that first Easter Sunday. They are totally shattered by the events of the past few days and despondently discussing everything as they walk along, trying to make sense of the whole thing. The one they hoped in was dead!

Suddenly a stranger catches up with them but, like Mary, they fail to recognise him. They were walking towards the sunset as Emmaus was west of Jerusalem and possibly they were dazzled by the glare of the setting sun. Despite the ridiculous rumours of a resurrection, they were not expecting to see Jesus. They start to tell Jesus all about himself (vs. 19-24). It all comes tumbling out—the disastrous events of the past few days, their dashed hopes, frustration, confusion. Jesus listens patiently to all this angst, absorbs it somehow into himself, gently chides them for their lack of faith and starts to explain that all these events were foretold in the Scriptures and that God's eternal purposes are being worked out right now! They still do not recognise him, and when they arrive home, and Jesus is about to leave them, they invite him to come in and stay the night (v. 29).

At the table Jesus went through the motions familiar at the beginning of a Jewish meal, though normally they would have been performed by the host not a guest. Bread was commonly broken at the prayer of thanksgiving before a meal. Perhaps there was something familiar with the way Jesus did this. They were not at the Last Supper (Mark 14:17) but may be they had been at the feeding of the Five Thousand (9:16,17). Something struck a chord. Perhaps they suddenly saw the nail marks in Jesus' hands. 'Their eyes were opened and they recognised him' (v. 31). This was the moment that God chose to reveal his Son to them and immediately, he vanished. Is this an oblique reference to the Lord's Supper here, reflecting the mystery of the special grace that comes to us as we share in the breaking of bread at Communion?

**Prayer: Lord, thank you that you travel with us in life's journey. May we see you in the Scriptures, and find you in the Breaking of Bread.**

Thursday 8th April 2010

# THE FULFILMENT OF PROPHECY

Luke 24:33-45

Mr and Mrs Cleopas head straight back to Jerusalem to find the other disciples and tell them all about what has happened. But they already know that Jesus has risen from the dead because Simon has seen him (see 1 Corinthians 15:5). While they were still in full flow about it all, Jesus comes among them giving the customary greeting, 'shalom', 'peace be with you'. Such an ordinary thing for Jesus to do but, understandably, the disciples are totally freaked out. They think he must be a ghost. Their fear was a natural reaction to the supernatural. He invites them to look at the scars in his hands and feet. He is made of flesh and bones. He is no ghost. The idea that the resurrection was not a physical resurrection is rebutted by the fact Jesus is hungry and asks them for something to eat—'they gave him a piece of broiled fish and he took it and ate it in their presence' (v. 42,43).

Jesus explains to them that everything he said was going to happen has happened and that it was foretold in Scripture. He is the fulfilment of Scripture. He solemnly divides the Hebrew Bible into the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. This is to emphasise that there is no part of Scripture that does not bear witness to Jesus. Throughout his ministry Scripture was being fulfilled (Matthew 8:17, Mark 14:49, Luke 4:21, John 19:24 etc. etc. ). Jesus did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfil them (Matthew 5:17).

'Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures' (v. 45). As with the two on the Emmaus Road, 'beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself '(24:27). When we read the Scriptures, it feeds our souls. It is milk and meat to us (1 Corinthians 3:2). It is what makes us strong and healthy as Christians because 'the word of God is living and active... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart '(Hebrews 4:12). Imagine what it must have been like to have Jesus open up the word to you. No wonder the Cleopas' said that their hearts were burning within them while he talked with them on the road and opened up the Scriptures to them (v. 32).

**Prayer: Lord, open our minds to understand the Scriptures. Speak to us today through what we have already read, and do us good.**

**Friday 9th April 2010**  
**PEACE BE WITH YOU**  
**John 20:19-23**

The disciples continued to meet in the upper room where the Last Supper had been held. They met in terror, listening fearfully for every step on the stair and for every knock on the door just in case the Sanhedrin came to arrest them as well. John tells us that it was at this time that Jesus came and stood among them and said 'Peace be with you.' This greeting is a normal everyday phrase, 'shalom to you'. It cannot just be translated as peace. It means far more than, 'may you be saved from trouble'. It means, 'may God give you every good thing'. The context in which it is used here is full of significant meaning. All that the Old Testament Prophets had poured into the term 'shalom' as the sum of the blessings of the kingdom of God have been realised in the redemptive acts of the incarnate Son of God on the cross for the salvation of the world. His 'Shalom' on Easter evening is the complement of 'It is finished' on the cross (19:30), for the peace of reconciliation and life from God has now been given. 'Shalom' is an Easter greeting which is why Paul includes it, with 'grace', in the greeting of all his epistles in the New Testament.

After showing them his hands and side (v. 20), 'again Jesus says 'Peace be with you'. Jesus then commissions his disciples (v. 21). He echoes what he prays to the Father, 'As you have sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world '(17:18). At the Last Supper Jesus spoke to the disciples about the Holy Spirit, 'whom the Father will send in my name '(14:26). He now breathes on them and says 'Receive the Holy Spirit '(v. 22). Literally the Greek says, 'Take the Holy Spirit, right here, right now!' Jesus breathed into them the gift of new life just as God breathed into Adam (Genesis 2:7), and Ezekiel called for the wind to breathe 'into these slain that they may live' (Ezekiel 37:9,10). Christ's death and resurrection has brought in the new age and they become new creatures in him (2 Corinthians 5:17). This comes before Pentecost. It is the 'quickenning' of the Spirit for life, the power and the victory of the Resurrection.

**Prayer: Lord, may we know your peace today. May we find that 'place of quiet rest near to the heart of God'.**

**Saturday 10th April 2010**  
**MY LORD AND MY GOD**  
**John 20:24-31**

Jesus appears to the disciples and Thomas isn't there. Where was he? Why had he gone off on his own separating himself off from the others. They are full of the excitement and thrill of seeing the Lord (v. 25). They are full of faith and the Holy Spirit and Thomas misses out. How would you feel in his position? I suspect we wouldn't just take other people's word for it, we would want to experience for ourselves. So Thomas makes his statement, often interpreted as doubt (v. 25). He is totally pessimistic, it can't possibly be true. Thomas is also portrayed as full of devotion and courage. He wants to go to Jerusalem with Jesus so that he can die with him (11:16). He is also honest and plain speaking, telling the Lord that he doesn't understand (14:5). Thomas throws out a challenge setting down ridiculous conditions for his belief. He would never believe that Jesus had risen from the dead until he had seen and handled the print of the nails in Jesus' hands and thrust his hand into the wound the spear had made in Jesus' side. A week goes by.

Jesus eventually comes back. Jesus cares for all, everywhere and he takes up this challenge. He knows Thomas' heart. He repeats Thomas' own words and invites Thomas to make the test that he had demanded. But he never did. John speaks of Thomas seeing the Lord (v. 29). The impression given is that Thomas is so overwhelmed by the appearance of the Lord and his words to him that, without any further demonstration, he bursts out his confession. Thomas' heart overflows with love and devotion. His statement is not simply a kind of address to Jesus, like a name or an exclamation, to the praise of God. Rather it is a confession issuing from the depths of Thomas' soul, 'You are my Lord and my God'. From the mouth of the most famous doubter of the resurrection comes the greatest confession of the Lord who rose from the dead. The emphasis in v. 29 is not on Thomas but on believers who have not seen. We are blessed because, without having Thomas' experience, we still share in his faith and also say to Jesus 'my Lord and my God'.

**Prayer: Lord, although we have not seen you in the flesh, help us to truly say from the depths of our hearts—My Lord and my God—and really mean it!**

**Sunday 11th April 2010**

# **IT IS THE LORD**

**John 21:1-14**

Matthew tells us that the first disciples were called to be 'fishers of men.' (Matthew 4:18-20). Here we see that called to be fishers of men they are back fishing for fish. There seems to be almost desperation mixed with boredom in Peter's words, 'I'm going out to fish.' The others join him. It is as if they couldn't think of anything else to do, so they go back to what they know. Is this the fulfilment of Jesus' prediction in 16:32, 'But a time is coming and has come, when you will be scattered each to his own home?'

The disciples have gone to Galilee. Jesus told them he would go ahead of them and they would see him there (Mark 14:28, 16:7). They had seen Jesus after the resurrection but they still failed to recognise him when he shouts out to them from the shore—too preoccupied with their fruitless pursuits to recognise Jesus? The fishing is not going well. Jesus seems to be rubbing this in when he asks innocently, 'caught anything lads?' The supernatural knowledge of the risen Lord points them in the right direction and they net a miraculous load of fish. This is to be compared with a similar haul of fish in Luke 5:1-11. Here, when Peter, as a fisherman, realised what had happened, 'he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man'. Peter had experienced the grace of God and in the light of it is faced with his own sinfulness. When the cry goes up from the boat It is the Lord!, Peter's reactions are very different. He can't wait for the slow progress of the boat, he leaps into the water, having 'put on his outer garment' (v. 7). This seems such a funny thing to do as it would seem more sensible to take things off before jumping into water! Maybe he didn't want to appear before his master naked out of reverence to him. Peter was certainly keener to get into the water than he was in Matthew 14:25-32 when he saw Jesus walking on the water. When the exhausted disciples having been fishing all night finally landed, they smelled the coals on the fire, the barbequed fish and the hot bread. Jesus had cooked them breakfast. 'Come have breakfast,' he says.

**Prayer: Lord, help us to get our priorities right! Help us to keep focussed on you and on your plans and purposes for us as individuals and as a church. Help us to enjoy fellowship with you.**

Monday 12th April 2010

# PETER'S DENIAL PREDICTED

Matthew 26:31-35

Peter's reactions to the presence of the risen Lord on the beach in Galilee are even more poignant in the light of his recent failure and denial of Christ on the night of his arrest. At the Passover feast Jesus predicts everything. It is as if inspired by the Holy Spirit in his mind's eye, he sees the arrest, the trial and the disciples' subsequent failure and weakness. He even seems to see them coming together for breakfast on the beach (v. 32). Even in the midst of his own impending suffering, Jesus is aware of the effect it will have on his beloved disciples. He knows that they are going to flee for their lives and abandon him in the moment of his deepest need. He does not chastise them in any way. There is no sense of reproach or condemnation in his words. It is all going to be too much for them so he spends time warning them, trying to explain to them clearly what is going to happen so that they might be prepared for it. He seems to know that it isn't going to make much difference at the time but later, after it has all happened, then they may be able to come to terms with the experience and remember what he said to them. Jesus knew these men at their worst and still loved them. Jesus has nothing but sympathy for them in their weakness.

Peter again takes the role of leader, the first as always to speak. His character is believable and totally human. We can all identify with Peter, with his faults and failings. His over-confidence in himself. He knew he loved Jesus—that was never in doubt—but he thought he could face any situation all by himself. Peter thought he was stronger than Jesus knew him to be. We will only be safe when we replace our pride and self-confidence with the humility that knows its own weakness, depending not on ourselves but Christ. As Paul said, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more in my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me... For when I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Corinthians 12:9,10). Peter in his first letter later came to write, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time' (1 Peter 5:5,6).

**Prayer: Lord, help us not to rely simply on our own abilities, intelligence, riches—help us to rely on you every step of the way.**

Tuesday 13th April 2010

## PETER'S DENIAL

Matthew 26:69-75

We are told in Matthew 26:56b that, after Jesus was arrested, 'all the disciples deserted him and fled but in v. 58 Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest.' In Palestine the houses of the well off were built in a hollow square around an open courtyard with various rooms opening out from it. For Peter to enter that courtyard in the centre of the High Priest's house was like walking into the lions' den but Peter did it. Even though this sorry story ends in cowardice, it starts with bravery.

While Peter waits in the courtyard to see what's going to happen, a servant girl appears to recognise him as a follower of Jesus. Why didn't he just run for it then? Why hang around? Perhaps Peter was torn between natural desire for self preservation and overwhelming love and concern for Jesus. In his heart there was fear and love all mixed up together. He denies it. Then he goes towards the gateway and waits in the porch. Somebody else recognises him saying that he was definitely with Jesus (v. 71). But still he doesn't go. He denies it again. But he has a strong Galilean accent and gives himself away (v. 73). The Galilean accent was often ridiculed in Judean society and it was so rough and ugly that no Galilean was allowed to pronounce the benediction at a synagogue service. Again he is accused of following the Galilean, Jesus of Nazareth. He denies him the third time. Now he starts to get angry. He not only swears that he doesn't know Jesus he starts to rant and rave, cursing himself and most probably Jesus as well. This is why later persecuted Christians were forced to do the same as proof of their apostasy. But Peter is still in that courtyard. The cock crows, and Peter remembers the words Jesus had spoken, 'Before the cock crows, you will disown me three times', (v. 75). Now he leaves but he is a broken man. He goes out and weeps bitterly. There is nothing he can do to relieve the devastating feeling of abject failure and remorse. Jesus' shocking prediction had been amply fulfilled. There is a picture that shows the scene when, following Peter's third denial, the cock crows and at that moment Jesus is led out into the courtyard and their eyes meet, (see Luke 22:6).

**Prayer: Lord, help us to follow wherever you lead, and never to be afraid to confess you before others.**

Wednesday 14th April 2010

# PETER'S COMMISSIONING

## John 21:15-17

We have the story of Peter's denial because Peter told everybody what happened. Far from trying to hush it up, for Peter, it was an essential part of his gospel. He could say, 'That is the way Jesus can forgive. He forgave me when I failed him in his bitterest hour of need. That is what Jesus can do. He took me, Peter the coward, and used even me'. Peter told the story of his own shame and sin that everyone might know the glory of the forgiving love and cleansing power of Jesus Christ. The denial weighed heavily on Peter's heart—days and nights of torture and self recrimination. Sights of the risen Lord filled his heart with such hope but would Jesus forgive him? Could he ever forgive himself? Peter's love had grown cold. When the test came he had been found wanting. If Peter was to be restored, it wasn't enough for him to just confess his failure. His love for Jesus had to be re-kindled.

Peter rushed to the beach to meet Jesus. What passed between them? After breakfast, Jesus comes straight to the point— 'Do you love me? ' Echoing the three fold denial, Jesus asks Peter the same question and three times Peter says that he does. Jesus is giving Peter the opportunity to face up to what he really does feel about him. He asks him if he loves him 'more than these?' More than these what? Friends? Fish? Jesus had said to the crowds, 'If anyone comes after me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple '(Luke 14:26). Jesus is not saying that we must literally hate others but that the love we have for him is so great that our other loves look like hate in comparison. This conversation holds a clever play on two Greek words for love: 'Peter do you love me? Yes Lord, I like you. Peter, do you love me? Yes Lord, I do like you! Peter, do you like me—is even that true? Yes Lord, I really do like you!' Jesus is forcing Peter to be honest with himself. When Peter pretended to love Jesus more than he did, it led to failure but when he made a realistic assessment, the love he did have could grow. The denial is cancelled by Jesus' commissioning 'Feed my sheep,' Peter knew he was forgiven. Peter wept again but this time with tears of joy!

**Prayer:** Lord, help us to know that we are truly forgiven, that we are right with you, and that you a purpose for us in life.

**Thursday 15th April 2010**

# **PETER'S GLORY**

**John 21:18-25**

The Peter of the book of Acts is very different to the Peter of the Gospels. A transformation has taken place. After his denial of Jesus, he knows there is a serious problem, something that is troubling him deep inside. He sees Jesus on the beach and knows that this is God's time. It is now or never. Jesus puts his finger on the problem by looking into Peter's heart, as he did with Nathaniel while he was sitting under the fig tree (John 2:45-49), and he asks him - 'Do you love me?' Jesus gives Peter the commission to Pastor the flock of God. - 'shepherd my sheep'. Peter's restoration is complete and he is called to service. Peter did just that. He didn't fail his Lord again. He did become Peter, the rock. Jesus said, 'And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it' (Matthew 16:18). Jesus chose one who was fallible, who knew what it was to fail and this is what made Peter a strong and effective Pastor. Jesus had said to him, 'when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers' (Luke 22:32). When he was fulfilling Jesus' command to feed his sheep, Peter wrote letters to the churches in the face of separation, suffering and persecution to encourage, teach and exhort. 'I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it' (1 Peter 5:12). He writes to the Elders in the same letter, 'To the Elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed. Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be' (1 Peter 5:1,2).

Jesus foretells Peter's martyrdom (vs. 18,19) which would be for God's glory. Peter went to the cross in Rome c. AD 64 but when he was being nailed to it, he asked to be nailed head downwards because he said he was not worthy to die in the same way as his Lord. After Peter's confession of Christ, Jesus had said to the disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me' (Luke 9:23). As if to remind Peter of this Jesus says to him (v. 19b), 'Follow me!'

**Prayer: Lord, help us to recognise that the true way to glory—the kind of glory that exalts you as well as blesses us—is through true humility.**

**Friday 16th April 2010**  
**THE GREAT COMMISSION**  
**Matthew 28:16-20**

Jesus suddenly appeared to the women who were rushing away from the tomb. On the instructions of the angels, they were going to tell the other disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead. They were afraid yet filled with joy. Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me', (28:10). So the eleven—Judas had committed suicide (27:5)—were in Galilee when he appeared among them again. What is so amazing is some still doubted (v. 17) or perhaps hesitated—they were not sure that the person they were seeing was the one who was crucified. Perhaps they were not sure that Jesus really was risen. They may have wondered whether they were seeing a vision, not a real person. Perhaps they weren't sure that it really was Jesus. There were most probably more than just the eleven there. The group could have been more than 500 (1 Corinthians 15:6). Jesus comes to them (v. 18). As the risen Christ he is no longer the penniless preacher and healer that they knew so well. He is no longer a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering... stricken by God (Isaiah 53:3,4). Now he has received the fullest possible authority in heaven and on earth. He makes it clear that the limitations of the incarnation no longer apply. He has supreme authority throughout the universe. He assures them of this power. Nothing is outside the power of the one who has died and conquered death. 'Death had been swallowed up in victory' (1 Corinthians 15:54).

Jesus said, 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you' (John 20:21). God is a missionary God who sent his Son into the world to suffer at the hands of sinful, rebellious human beings to save them. Jesus gives them the Great Commission, the commission to win people of all nations to himself. Revelation 7:9 tells us in heaven there will be worshippers from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. What a task for so few people to undertake! How must they have felt at the prospect of it? But as soon as the command was given so was the promise—Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age—he is still with us!

**Prayer: Lord, help us to hear your call to be a missionary people—help us to engage winsomely with others knowing that you are with us.**

**Saturday 17th April 2010**  
**THE LAST COMMISSION**  
**Luke 24:46-49**

In the closing verses of Mark's Gospel Jesus tells the disciples that they are to 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well' (Mark 16:15-18). Whatever the thought about the literal interpretation of this passage, it is pretty certain that Christ's followers are required by the Lord to do some extraordinary things.

To go into the world to make disciples preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus is not something that the scared, weak, vulnerable, insecure, shell-shocked disciples could do without help so ... Jesus gave them the Last Commission. He had opened up the Scriptures to them (v. 45) and he talked about what his Father had promised (v. 49a). This is a reference to the coming of the Spirit as prophesied in Joel 2:28-29. Jesus promised the disciples in the Upper Room, I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you (John 14:15-17). Jesus knew the Great Commission would not be possible without the Last Commission and they shouldn't even attempt it in their meagre, limited strength. They had to stay in the city until they had been clothed with power from on high (v. 49b). The only way they would be able to preach to all nations was to be endowed with supernatural miracle working power and filled to overflowing with limitless heavenly resources. Then and only then would they be witnesses. Gradually it dawns on the disciples. The plan of God is revealed. The whole drama of creation and temptation, sin and forgiveness, love and hate, death and life was unfolded to the disciples and they see themselves caught up in the purposes of God. They are brought from joy to service as they are commissioned to go as witnesses for Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Prayer: Lord, may we be emptied of self and filled with you!**

**Sunday 18th April 2010**  
**TAKEN UP INTO HEAVEN**  
**Luke 24:50-53**

Jesus has said what he has to say and leads his disciples out of the city towards Bethany, where Mary, Martha and Lazarus live, to the Mount of Olives. Jesus knows the area well having spent many a night in prayer here (Luke 21:37), including the night of his arrest (22:39). He lifts up his hands and blesses them (v. 50)—nothing too extra-ordinary in that. But then he disappears—something that has happened before. After the episode in the synagogue when he preaches that he had come to fulfil the mission outlined in Isaiah 61:1-2—'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he had anointed me to preach good news to the poor'—they tried to kill him and he disappeared through the crowd (Luke 4:30). When he declares himself to be the Messiah in his emphatic statement—'Before Abraham was born, I am!'—they try to stone him and he disappears through the crowd (John 8:58). In the tomb, dead, wrapped in linen cloths he disappears—the tomb empty because Jesus has risen from the dead—alive again walking, talking, eating (Luke 24:39).

This time it is different. 'While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven' (v. 51). The response to this dramatic happening is significant! We are told here—'Then they worshipped him' (v.52)—as though it is only now that they recognise Jesus for whom he really is! Suddenly everything falls into place for the disciples—Jesus is more than a teacher or prophet or miracle worker—he is none other than God himself come among them in human form and now returning to his Father's side! The word used for worship here means 'to make obeisance, to reverence'. This is the first time in Luke's Gospel that worship is directed to Jesus suggesting that, for Luke, this event marks a clear sea change in the comprehension of the disciples. For Luke, the bi-product of this is that the disciples were filled with 'great joy'—even though Jesus has ascended 'they returned to Jerusalem with great joy' (v.52). Moreover, such joy was not self-centred but rather directed God-wards—'And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God' (v.53)!

**Prayer: Lord, thank you that even though you have returned to Heaven you are still with us by your Spirit. Fill us with your joy.**

Monday 19th April 2010

# THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

Acts 1:1-8

The disciples obeyed Jesus and waited for over a month in Jerusalem for the gift of the Spirit. What an extraordinary thing to do! They can't have really understood what they were doing. Luke links the end of his Gospel with the start of Acts by reminding his readers of the command to stay in the city and wait (v. 4). After being in Galilee they returned to Jerusalem because this was the divinely intended scene for the giving of the Spirit. The place where Jesus had been rejected was to be the place where the new witness to him would begin.

Jesus reminded them (v. 5) of the testimony of John the Baptist. He baptised only with water but he prophesied the coming of the One who would baptise with 'the Holy Spirit and with fire' (Luke 3:16). Peter alludes to the same thing in Acts 11:16 when he is recounting what happened to the Gentile believers—'As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us in the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said; John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit. So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God? 'To be baptised means to be immersed in water signifying cleansing. To be baptised with the Holy Spirit means to be immersed supernatural power (v. 8). Ten days later, the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost when the disciples were all together waiting for God's promised gift. And he came—'Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed like tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them' (2:1-40). In the power of the Holy Spirit they really did become witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth as the book of Acts testifies and the Gospel is brought to the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-46).

**Prayer:** Lord, baptise us afresh with your Spirit so we might serve you and others powerfully and effectively.

**Tuesday 20th April 2010**

# **THE ASCENSION**

**Acts 1:9-11**

Luke concluded his Gospel by telling us that 'While he was blessing them, (Jesus) left them and was taken up into heaven' (Luke 24:51). Here, in the opening verses of the second volume of his history of Jesus and the Church, Luke takes up where he left off—with the story of Jesus' Ascension into Heaven. Luke tells us that Jesus 'was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight '(v.9).

Jesus was hidden from them because of the cloud that enveloped him! Was this simply ordinary cloud? Or was this the Shekinah glory cloud? The cloud that descended to guide the Israelites through the desert—a visible symbol of God's presence among his people (Exodus 13:21). The cloud that filled the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34) and Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:10-11) to show that the divine glory was there. At the transfiguration, Jesus was enveloped in a cloud and there came a voice from the cloud saying, 'This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him' (Luke 9:34,35). The disciples are left standing there, looking up to into the sky, 'gob-smacked!' (v.10) Two angels have to explain things to them—although interestingly enough the angels emphasis is not on the past but on the future—'Men of Galilee ... why do you stand here looking up into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven '(v.11). For Christ, the Ascension is the fulfilment of his mission on earth. It did not end with the cross or the resurrection but with the ascension—because (as we have seen) the disciples had to be convinced of who Jesus really was, and the validity and vital importance of the message they had to proclaim!

The essential nature of the Gospel message is added to by the fact, as the angels emphasise, that Jesus is coming back again (v.11)—not to be born in a manger or die on a cross this time, but as King of kings and Lord of lords coming to judge both living and dead and take those that are truly his home to be with him in Glory (Revelation 19)!

**Prayer: Lord, help us to keep looking up and living the right way!**

**Wednesday 21st April 2010**  
**CONSTANTLY IN PRAYER**  
**Acts 1:12-14**

Put yourself in the shoes of the disciples returning to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives having just witnessed the ascension of Jesus—having finally comprehended that Jesus was truly God incarnate, and with the words of the angels ringing in their ears concerning the fact that one day Jesus would return. These things alone must have given them an underlying seriousness to go with the spirit of worship, joy, and praise they outwardly displayed (Luke 24:52,53). Clearly they recalled the words of Jesus to them, during his several resurrection appearances, concerning the importance of prayerfully waiting upon God for the baptism and empowering of the Holy Spirit vital for the ministry and mission to which he was calling them (Acts 1:4,5,8). Whatever they thought of those words at the time, they must have assumed an even greater importance now following Jesus' ascension and the revelation that Jesus was one day to return. Luke tells us here that 'When they arrived (back in Jerusalem) they went upstairs to the room where they were staying (and) ... all joined together constantly in prayer' (vs.13, 14).

The Greek literally says that 'They all were continuing steadfastly with one mind in prayer' which, as well as emphasising the dedicated nature and depth of their prayer, underlines the unity of their prayer—especially given the mix of people gathered in that upper room. Luke lists the names of those gathering for prayer—the Eleven, various women (presumably those present at some of the resurrection appearances), Mary the mother of Jesus, Jesus' brothers (probably James and Jude both of whom wrote Letters found in our New Testament). Add to this the fact that this embryonic church consisted of around 120 members (v.15), the majority of whom would also have been involved in this season of prayer, and we have a real mix of people and personalities. To get 120 people praying together is amazing enough! To get 120 very different people praying together regularly, praying in a serious way, and praying with 'one mind' (v.14 NASB) is absolutely amazing! God surely had to be in this! And what were they praying for? Most surely they were praying, waiting prayerfully on God, for God to baptise the whole church with his Spirit—just as Jesus had instructed them to pray

**Prayer: Lord, teach us to pray, to really pray as this church prayed!**

Thursday 22nd April 2010

# DANGEROUS DISTRACTIONS

Acts 1:15-17

Leadership in the post-Easter Christian community is the concern of the rest of Acts 1. As we have already seen the community which gathers to wait and pray is an unusual one—a fact attested to by Luke's parenthetical mention of women who had been with Jesus since Galilee and of Jesus' mother and brothers [v.14]. The inclusion of women in the roster of the community would not have been missed by a second century reader as an indication that already we have a group which breaks barriers. Furthermore we see here a church which, at this particular time, was essentially a thoroughly Jewish community with a mission to the house of Israel. I Luke 9:1-6, the Twelve were sent To Israel. Jesus promised that the Twelve would sit upon thrones judging the twelve tribes (Luke 22:28-30). The twelve tribes must have twelve witnesses, thus the concern within this section to find a replacement for the traitor, Judas. The number 120 also figures prominently in the mission to Israel. According to Jewish law 120 males were required to form a synagogue with its own council—already the disciples have enough people to form a legitimate community.

Here (vs.15-17) Peter assumes leadership of this embryonic Christian community and begins an impassioned demand (presumably for the reasons explained above) that this Christian community replace Judas with another 'apostle'. Peter even goes as far as to quote various Scriptures in order to provide some kind of justification for this demand. BUT should Peter have gone down this particular track—or was it (as I believe) a dangerous distraction? Was this yet another example of Peter 'jumping the gun'? Peter had not yet received the promised 'baptism with the Holy Spirit' (vs.4,5) and thus was still 'doing his own thing' rather than God's thing. He assumed leadership of the embryonic Christian community—whereas later we see that James (the brother of Jesus) was recognised as the infant church's leader (Acts 15:13ff.)—and proceeds to lead the whole church away from the task Jesus had called them to. Nowhere do we read in Acts 1 that Jesus told his disciples to appoint another apostle! What he did tell them to do was to wait prayerfully for the gift of the Holy Spirit (vs.4,5)!

**Prayer: Lord, save us from being distracted from your real purposes!**

Friday 23rd April 2010

## JUDAS ISCARIOT

Acts 1:18,19

What are we to make of Judas Iscariot? Was he truly wicked—out to 'set up' Jesus from the start—or was he simply deluded? Was Judas' betrayal of Jesus inevitable—or did Jesus (knowing what Judas was about to do) offer Judas a final opportunity to turn away from his betrayal at the Last Supper? Ultimately we cannot answer these questions—whatever side we favour will probably reflect something of our own approach to the grace and mercy of God towards sinful people like us.

Here (vs.18,19) we have an editorial parenthesis in which Luke acquaints his readers with the circumstances of Judas' death—rather than part of Peter's speech. As an Aramaic speaker Peter would not have needed to translate the word *Akeldama* (v.19) but Luke writing to Gentile readers would need to explain its meaning. Luke is outspoken in calling Judas' betrayal of Jesus an act of *wickedness* (v.18) where the word he uses can equally be translated as 'infamy' or 'villainy' or even as a 'crime'. Even so, some people express sympathy for Judas because his role was predicted and therefore (it is thought) foreordained. This is not so, however. Even John Calvin (for all his emphasis on the sovereignty of God) wrote: 'Judas may not be excused on the ground that what befell him was prophesied, since he fell away not through the compulsion of prophecy but through the wickedness of his own heart.' In the Gospels only Matthew records what happened to Judas and he and Luke appear to be drawing on independent traditions. Their accounts, however, are not as divergent as some suggest. Both say that Judas died a miserable death, that a field was bought with the 30 pieces of silver paid him for betraying Jesus, and that the field became known as 'the field of blood.'

What can we learn from this sad story? Here was a man given an unprecedented opportunity—to spend three years in the constant company of the Son of God—who failed to benefit from that opportunity and, seemingly, even at the last rejected the opportunity held out to him by Jesus to choose a better way.

**Prayer: Lord, thank you for the many opportunities you give us day by day to walk and talk with you. Help us not to spurn them but use them.**

**Saturday 24th April 2010**

# **THE USE OF SCRIPTURE**

**Acts 1:20**

When I was a very new Christian I was told the Bible said that 'There is no God!' This completely threw me. I went home and searched the Bible until I found the verse he was referring to ... and it was quite correct. The Bible does say, 'There is no God!' In fact it says it twice—Psalm 14:1 and Psalm 53:1 both say, 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."' What this story raises however is how we rightly interpret Scripture. We believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God [2 Timothy 3:16] and, under God, our authority in all matters of faith and conduct, belief and behaviour. But how do we rightly interpret Scripture? Are we really meant to simply look for 'proof texts' in order to justify what we already think or plan to do?

Here in Acts 1:20, Peter explains and justifies his reasons for seeking a replacement for Judas by appealing to Scripture. It was Peter's conviction, expressed to the embryonic Christian community, that the warrant for replacing Judas was Old Testament Scripture: 'Brothers and sisters, the Scriptures had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago concerning Judas' [v.16]. Peter goes on to quote from two Psalms [Psalm 69 and Psalm 109], the first explaining what had happened (Judas' defection and death) and the second what they should do about it (replace him). These two scriptures seemed to Peter and the believers adequate general guidance on the need to replace Judas—but were they right to make use of Scripture in this way? Writing to Timothy, Paul encourages him (and every Christian) to 'correctly handle the word of truth' [2 Timothy 2:15]. The same idea is found in Proverbs 3:6 and 11:5 where we read of making a straight path or way. The expression used means 'cutting a straight road through a forest or difficult country so that a traveller may go directly to his or her destination'. Dick France suggests the picture drawn here may be of a 'carpenter or mason fashioning his material' implying that we are to work with the material of Scripture (not simply repeat it) by explaining and applying the teaching of Scripture for the benefit and spiritual growth of others. To interpret Scripture correctly and profitably we need to understand it in its context and then apply it accordingly.

**Prayer: Lord, help us to interpret the Scriptures honestly and wisely.**

Sunday 25th April 2010

# CHOOSING THE RIGHT LEADERS

Acts 1:21,22

There is a direct correlation between church growth and leadership. If the leaders are not in the right place with God the church certainly won't be. A church will only grow spiritually as the church leaders grow. This is true of Pastors, elders, and deacons, and also of organisations and activities within church life. Choosing the right leaders is of paramount importance.

Yesterday we pondered whether Peter was correct in seeking to replace Judas Iscariot with another 'apostle' to take his place? We questioned whether or not he was correct to justify this move from Scripture? I would argue that Peter was right in believing that Judas should be replaced by another—one of the Psalms he quoted was Psalm 69 and Psalm 69 is applied to Jesus five times in the New Testament. In Psalm 69 an innocent sufferer describes how his enemies hate and insult him without cause and how he is consumed with zeal for God's house. These verses are both quoted in John's Gospel by Jesus himself [John 15:25] and by his disciples [John 2:17], while Paul twice refers this Psalm to Jesus [Romans 11:9,10; 15:3]. Towards the end of Psalm 69 the Psalmist utters a prayer that God's judgment will fall on these wicked and impenitent people. Peter individualises this text and applies it to Judas on whom God's judgment has fallen [v.20a]. It is therefore unsurprising that Peter links this Psalm to another—Psalm 109 and the idea contained there that 'another take his (i.e. Judas') place of leadership' [v.20b]. Where I take issue with Peter is primarily to do with his timing and thus his choice of new 'apostle'. Firstly, Peter (and the others) were told specifically by Jesus to wait prayerfully upon God in prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to come upon them [Acts 1:4,5]. Nowhere were they told to cancel the church prayer meeting and replace it with a business meeting in order to debate and then elect a new apostle?! The infant church were daft enough to allow an egotistical leader (as Peter then was) to brow beat them into this presumptive action instead of waiting for the one God had chosen—not Matthias [v.26] who was never heard of again but Saul of Tarsus who became the Apostle Paul [see Acts 26].

**Prayer: Lord, help us as a church to choose our leaders wisely, and help those of us who are leaders to lead diligently and in a Christ-like way.**

Monday 26th April 2010

# CASTING LOTS OR LISTENING TO GOD?

Acts 1:23-26

Another reason Peter was wrong to interrupt the church prayer meeting, as they waited on God for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, in order hold a church business meeting to appoint a new apostle instead, was the method they chose to make this appointment. Luke tells us here that 'they proposed the names of two men: Joseph ... and Matthias' [v.23]. Having chosen these two men they then offered a quick prayer to God for guidance as to which of the two he had chosen [vs.24,25] and then, in effect, tossed a coin—heads Joseph, tails Matthias— Luke tells us 'they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles' [v.26]. What a bodge? But not unlike the way we—all too often—appoint our leaders in the church today?

Such an approach is perfectly justifiable, reasonable and sensible when you note the cluster of factors which contributed to 'the discovery of God's will in this matter'. First came the general leading of Scripture that a replacement for Judas should be made [vs.16-21]. Next they used common sense that if Judas' substitute was to have the same apostolic ministry he must have the same qualifications, including the eyewitness experience of Jesus and a personal appointment by him. This sound deductive reasoning led to the nomination of Joseph and Matthias. Thirdly, they prayed for though Jesus had gone he was still accessible to them by prayer and was acknowledged as having a knowledge of hearts which they lacked. Finally, they drew lots, by which they trusted Jesus to make his choice known. Leaving aside this fourth factor (because the Holy Spirit has now been given to us) the three remaining factors—Scripture, common sense, and prayer—appear to constitute a wholesome combination through which God may be trusted to guide us.

The problem with this approach is that appointing a replacement apostle was not God's priority at this time—waiting prayerfully upon God for the outpouring of his Spirit was! It was not God's time to appoint a replacement for Judas —that came later with the recognition of Paul as an Apostle. Contrast the approach here to that of the church in Antioch [Acts 13:1-3] where the church waited prayerfully upon God for revelation through the Holy Spirit. We are not to 'appoint' leaders but 'recognise' those God is raising up!

**Prayer: Lord, help us to listen to you rather than rely on our own reason.**

**Tuesday 27th April 2010**  
**ALL TOGETHER IN ONE PLACE**  
**Acts 2:1**

Having got the distraction of appointing a replacement apostle out of the way the embryonic church in Jerusalem return to prayerfully waiting upon God for the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit ... and finally that first Day of Pentecost in the Christian era dawns and the promise is fulfilled. Before we look in more detail at this, however, it is important to note that 'When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place' [v.1].

At first this seems no more than a matter-of-fact reference to the time and place of the Spirit's coming—they were all together in one place—and Luke is evidently not concerned to enlarge on this. We do not know if the 'house' [v.2] is still the upper room [Acts 1:13; 2:46b] or one of the many rooms or halls of the Temple [Luke 24:53; Acts 2:46a]. However when we link Luke's words here about this early Christian community being 'all together in one place' with the fact that 'all the believers were together and had everything in common' [v.44] and that 'all the believers were one in heart and mind' [Acts 4:32], we have a sense something remarkable has happened to them as a result of their prayer together. As they waited upon the Lord for the outpouring of the Spirit it would seem that one of the by-products was that they grew closer together as group—even to the extent that they became 'one in heart and mind'. Whilst God does not look for perfection in us in order to pour his Spirit out upon us, he does look for something from us—co-operation, a willingness to allow him to shape us, to fit us for service. Bringing a local church together to a place in God where they are truly of one heart and one mind about wanting to experience the power of God coming upon them in a new way is one example of this. For us, it raises the question: Are we really united in our desire to see God do 'a new thing' among us [Isaiah 43:18,19]? Are we really open to God for him to change us—as individuals and as a church—so that he can pour his Spirit upon us and through us to others? Take a little extra time to read Jeremiah 18:1-6 where God is pictured as the Divine Potter shaping his people according to his purposes for them (us) and think about what God has to say to us through this picture.

**Prayer: Spirit of the living God fall afresh on me ... break me, melt me, mould me, fill me ... Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.**

Wednesday 28th April 2010

# THE PHENOMENA OF WIND

## Acts 2:2

Luke tells us here that 'Suddenly' [v.2] the great event took place—the Spirit of God came upon them! And his coming was accompanied by three supernatural signs—a sound, a sight, and strange speech. Firstly, Luke tells us, there came from heaven 'a sound like the blowing of a violent wind' and the noise of it 'filled the whole house where they were sitting' [v.2]. Whilst initially this 'wind' seemed natural phenomena it was in fact supernatural both in origin and character. The noise was not a wind but sounded like it. What they experienced was more than sensory, it was significant. Later on the people asked, 'What does this mean?' [v.12] and we too want to try and understand what was going on here. John Stott suggests that these three signs—wind, fire, language—represented 'the new era of the Spirit ... and the new work which he had come to do'. The noise like wind symbolised the 'power' that Jesus had promised to his disciples to enable them to be effective witnesses [Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8].

There are two words for 'power' in Greek—the language of the New Testament. The first word is *exousia* and is best understood as 'authority'. This is the kind of authority we are given when we become children of God through the 'new birth'. As John tells us in the Prologue to his Gospel: 'To all who received (Jesus), to those who believed in his name, he gave the authority to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor human decision or a husband's will, but born of God' [John 1:12,13]. We must not denigrate such authority because it is akin to the authority Jesus himself displayed [see Matthew 7:28,29]—authority to be called children of God, authority in prayer, authority over the demonic powers. The second word (the word suggested here) is *dunamis* or miracle working power and Jesus associated it particularly with the power to be effective witnesses [Acts 1:8]. It is a word always associated with the power of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. We get our words 'dynamite' and 'dynamo' from *dunamis*. It is better for us to seek to be dynamos channelling God's power positively!

**Prayer: Lord, fill us with your power so that we may be effective witnesses for you wherever we go.**

Thursday 29th April 2010

# THE PHENOMENA OF FIRE

## Acts 2:3

Luke tells us here that the second phenomena to accompany the coming of the Holy Spirit that first Pentecost in the Christian era was fire. He tells us there appeared to them visibly 'what seemed to be tongues of fire' which 'separated and came to rest on each of them' [v.3] becoming for each an individual possession. Once again what appeared at first to be natural phenomena was in fact supernatural in both origin and character—the 'fire' here resembled fire as we know it but was not in fact literal fire. Just as the noise like wind may have symbolised power so the sight like fire may be understood to symbolise 'purity' or 'holiness' like the live coal which cleansed Isaiah [Isaiah 6:6,7].

John the Baptist promised that when Jesus, the Messiah, came he would 'baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire' [Matthew 3:11]. Clearly this prophetic statement was fulfilled at Pentecost when these first disciples were 'baptised with the Holy Spirit' [Acts 1:5] and (as we see here) 'what seemed to be tongues of fire ... separated and came to rest on each one of them' [v.3]. It is important to see these 'tongues of fire' as more than symbolic, however. God does not simply want to make us powerful but holy! It is not just a question of having divine authority and moving in miracle working power but living holy, separated, godly lives—being pure channels that God can flow through to others. If we are serious about wanting to be filled with the Spirit we need to ponder the words of A W Tozer: *'Are you sure that you want to be possessed by a Spirit who, while he is pure and gentle and wise, will insist upon being Lord of your life? Are you sure you want your personality to be taken over by One who will require obedience to the written word? Who will not tolerate any of the self-sins in your life: self-love, self-indulgence? Who will not permit you to boast or strut or show off? Who will take the direction of your life away from you and will reserve the sovereign right to test you and discipline you? Unless you can answer an eager "yes" to these questions you do not want to be filled. You want the thrill or the victory or the power—but you do not want to be filled with the Spirit!'*

**Prayer:** Lord, help us to really want to be filled with your Spirit. Help us not just to want your authority and power but to be holy, godly people.

Friday 30th April 2010

# THE PHENOMENA OF 'OTHER' LANGUAGE

## Acts 2:4

Luke tells us here the third phenomena to accompany the coming of the Holy Spirit that first Pentecost in the Christian era was 'other' language. He tells us that 'all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues (i.e. languages of some kind) as the Spirit enabled them [v.4]. Yet again, whilst this would appear to be natural phenomena—the ability to speak a foreign language—it was nevertheless supernatural both in origin and character. This speech was in languages which were not ordinary but in some way 'other' to normal language. What is particularly unusual about this phenomena is that the disciples were enabled to speak in foreign languages that they had never learned. Later in this passage Luke tells us that the thousands of people present in Jerusalem at that time—there for the Festival—were 'utterly amazed' [v.7] because 'we hear (the disciples) declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues' [v.11]! This particular supernatural phenomena has come to be known as *glossolia* (from the Greek word *glossa* for tongue). Paul throws more light on this particular phenomena when he tells the Corinthian church that *glossolia* may be 'in human or angelic tongues' [1 Corinthians 13:1].

What are we to make of this particular phenomena—phenomena not simply manifest on this first Day of Pentecost in the Christian era but something described by Paul as one of the 'gifts of the Spirit' [1 Corinthians 12:7-11]? Firstly, it was not the result of intoxication, of drinking 'too much wine' [v.13]. Peter is emphatic on this point [v.15]. Secondly, it was not a mistake or a miracle of hearing, in contrast to speaking so that the audience supposed that the believers spoke in other languages when they did not (as James Dunn in his book *Jesus and the Spirit* suggests). Thirdly, it was not a case of incoherent utterance—'inarticulate ecstatic babbling' (as William Neil in his commentary suggests). Fourthly, what we have here is a supernatural ability to speak in recognisable languages in such a way that the crowds astonishment was aroused by 'God's wonders' [v.11] not the languages, by the content not the medium of the communication. Whatever language we use it needs to be the kind of language that commends Jesus Christ to others [see Philippians 2:16; 1 Peter 4:11].

**Prayer: Lord, help us to use our tongues wisely and to your glory.**