

Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2 and Acts 2:36-41

Sunday 10th February 2019

Brightons Parish Church

“When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’”

Between my first sermon in November last year and the first three sermons of my time here, we have begun to explore what the early chapters of the book of Acts might say to us at this time. In Acts we find the early church experiencing the winds of change – they are on the cusp of huge changes, changes like they had never seen nor expected. And so, Acts, especially these early chapters, gives us insight into some core things to remember in the midst of change.

For we are, ourselves, in the midst of change too. You have a new minister here and that will bring change, in time, maybe even already.

But more broadly, the Church, both the Church of Scotland and the universal Church, finds itself in changing times. As a denomination, numbers are falling and we struggle to know how to engage with today's generation; indeed, we struggle to engage with any of the generations that don't come to church, not just the young. In our denomination too, it is predicted that minister numbers will continue to fall, that in ten years' time, maybe less, there will be around half our current number of ministers, meaning about one minister for every three churches. We are very much in changing circumstances, and Brightons Parish Church will not remain unaffected. What's more, you also may be facing a change in personal circumstances. Change is everywhere.

So, what core things has Acts taught us so far? Well, **we've thought about how** Jesus IS risen and His ministry continues, even to this very day. We've seen that part of His continuing ministry is **to challenge us, to force** us to reconsider the box we have Him in, so that He can expand that box, or even blow it apart, leading us into a greater fullness of life with the aid of His Holy Spirit. **And last week,** we thought about how Jesus was shown to be the promised Messiah and that He is Lord and so in Jesus we see the reign of God.

In our passage today, Peter has covered the same material we have, and he reaches that point **where he says:** “Therefore...be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

But the moment does not end there, for we read: “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’”

The people were conscience-stricken and convicted; they were convicted of their need for Jesus; they were convicted that their faith had not been in Him, but in other things and in other people.

Another translation puts it this way: ‘Cut to the quick, those who were there listening asked Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers! Brothers! So now what do we do?”’

So now what do we do? That question is as applicable for us as it was then. In the midst of change - so now what do we do? After we know whom Jesus is: that He is alive, that He is Lord and Messiah,...

that He His ministry is continuing by His Spirit through His Church – so now, what do we do? So now what do we do when we know He is challenging us and calling us to expand the box? So now, what do we do?

We read on: “Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”

First off, Peter says to repent and to repent is much more than saying sorry or feeling remorse for what we’ve done. True repentance is when our minds are changed about Jesus such that our attitudes towards Him change and consequently, the direction of our life changes too...

In essence, we need to know for ourselves what the **Apostle Paul wrote**: That 'he [Jesus] died for all, [so] that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.' (2 Cor.5:15)

We see here that repentance involves two things. **Firstly**, we can't truly repent if we don't truly know who Jesus is and why He died on the Cross.

In the same passage, **Paul writes in v21**, 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.' It's a strange sounding idea, but what Paul wants us to understand is that Jesus, the perfect, holy, sinless Son of God, was treated as a sinner and bore the penalty of all sin in place of us. But why did God do that?

Well, our God is a holy God – and thank God that He is! Imagine a God who could simply overlook sin? That God would not be righteous, that God would not be perfect – that God would not even be loving because love does not delight in evil. And so, sin offends God, it grieves God, it alienates God and ourselves, and so we need a Saviour – everyone of us needs someone to save us from our alienation from God and the brokenness we have brought upon ourselves. And Jesus is that Saviour, He is the Messiah. Jesus died, that we might be reconciled to God, that we might be forgiven for our sins.

But it is perfectly possible to know who Jesus is and why He died, but never to repent. And so, Paul's second point about true repentance comes to the fore.

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That those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him. This is the true mark of repentance – do you live for Jesus? Does He shape your life? You will know you have truly repented when you see Jesus as He truly is and you can honestly say that He shapes your choices, your values, your priorities – that’s when you know you live for Him. That’s true repentance.

But as I say, it’s entirely easy not to repent because so often we only get half of the story. **In the Church of Scotland, we have not been good in calling for a response to Jesus, we shy away from it and so we leave people short-changed...**

Sure, we share that God loves you, that Jesus died for you, but we don't tell people the next bit – that they need to respond. And so, they miss out on the whole package. My own story is a testimony to this very failure in our denomination but also of God's grace.

I grew up in the Church of Scotland, being baptised within it, going to Sunday School and then to Youth Fellowship. I remember one time in my teenage years of being motivated to read the Gospel of Mark, and going to my minister with my questions, but he simply brushed over them. I could never really understand his preaching, and I cannot remember hearing much about the love God has for me, nor that I needed to respond...

And so, I went to Youth Fellowship until it stopped, and then to the Sunday evening service when I worked in the morning, and I thought I was genuinely a Christian because I went to church, I helped run my local Cub Scout Pack and I had a good public image.

But over the course of my teenage years I grew in confidence and with that I grew in selfishness, and that particularly impacted the girls that I dated, for it was all about me and what I could get from the relationship. It came to a head when I was out celebrating my 19th birthday, and the parts I can remember from that night continue to shock and horrify me. My selfishness was rampant, and I lived for me.

But in the small hours of the morning after, God met with me, as I lay in bed, and He convicted me of my sin, and I repented – I didn't say anything, but I died to self, and I got up that morning, out of that bed, a new man, a new creation as the Apostle Paul puts it, and I no longer lived for self but for Jesus: He was the centre of my life now, His will and His call and His goodness and love shown on Cross were the things I would build my life upon.

Friends, we don't all need to have such a dramatic change, but do all need to repent – to respond to the Good News of who Jesus is and why He died, such that He becomes the centre of our lives and we then live for Him. Hopefully you've heard that before, but if you haven't, now is the day of salvation, now can be the day of your salvation – and so as Christ's ambassador, I implore you:

be reconciled to God. Humble yourself, truly repent; come to God anew, set your hope upon Jesus, and come in to that new life with God. Before I became a Christian, I thought I was living life to the full, I thought I knew what the good life was, but it wasn't the whole truth; it's only through Jesus that you can know life in all its fullness – not an easy life, not a perfect life – but a life beyond imagination, a life we all hunger for in the deepest parts of our souls.

Friends, if you haven't repented, if you don't live for Jesus, then today could be your day, and I invite you to come speak with me after the service and together we can help you find that new life in Jesus.

But if you have repented, if by God's grace you are a new creation, then there is a call upon your life for Peter says: "Repent...every one of you...And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Now what is that gift given for? We've heard in recent weeks that the Holy Spirit helps us to know who Jesus is and assures us that we are children of God – but the Spirit is also given for another reason. As the Apostle Paul said: "All this is from God, who...gave us the ministry of reconciliation...We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us."

So, there is call for all of us to live for Jesus by being His ambassador, His witness, and so you are called into the ministry of reconciliation;...

you are called to share your faith with others, to see everyone you meet through the lens of the cross, and to give of yourself for that ministry, the continuing ministry of Jesus.

Today, I want to focus on our hearts and outlook, because in all likelihood, some of us may shy away from this for any number of reasons. We might let fear, or feelings of inadequacy or awkwardness, or past negative experiences put us off. We might also shy away from it because we are not motivated to do so, that “Christ’s love [does not] compel us”. And that may have happened because of any number of reasons as well.

But whether you shy away because of fear, or for lack of love for God and neighbour, today God wants to help you have the right heart –

He calls you back to live for Jesus, He calls you out of fear and out of apathy, because today, now, is the day of salvation, and what you have received is not for you alone, but for every person that Jesus died for. Friends, if that is you – if fear or apathy hold you back from sharing in the life of this church, from sharing your faith with others – then you need to do business with God, and in a few moments, we'll have an opportunity to pray about that.

So, we need to have the right heart for this ministry of reconciliation – but we also need to have the right outlook. We need to see, we need to appreciate, that “now is the day of salvation”. Now is the day, now is the time. Now is the day that people can come into a life-changing relationship with Jesus; now is the time for broken hearts to be mended, and injustices to be challenged, and the poor helped...

Now is the day, now is the time, for the kingdom of God to come in our midst – and for that we need to have the right outlook, so that we can see the world as it is and see the world as it could be within the kingdom of God. With the right outlook we will see that “now is the day of salvation”, and we will do everything we can to usher in the kingdom.

Friends, we are in changing circumstances, and more change will come, and will need to come, if we want to know life in all its fullness, for ourselves, for one another and for the wider world. But for that to happen, we need to have the right outlook – that “this is the day of salvation” – and we need to have the right heart – that “the love of Christ compels us” –

because then we will give of ourselves to that change, we lean in to that change, and before we know it, we'll really be living for Jesus and participating in His continuing ministry, the ministry of reconciliation.

Brothers, sisters, what shall we do? First of all – have you repented? Do you live for Jesus? Secondly, will we commit to this ministry of reconciliation? Do we have the right heart? Do we have the right outlook?

Let us pray.