The Holy Spirit and Gospel Spreading
Acts 10:33-11:18

Now, some of you know already that I'm not the greatest fan of soccer. I know some of you think it's the beautiful game, but watching grown men rolling around on the ground pretending to be hurt just doesn't do it for me. And yet, even I know that the football World Cup starts next week. But I also know that barring some miracle England stands zero chance of winning it. But strange things happen don't they? Things you would never have predicted, things you would never have put your money on, sometimes happen.

And in some ways Acts is written to explain why something incredibly unlikely came to pass. You see, whatever you think of the Christian faith, I don't think that anyone would really deny that the life of Jesus of Nazareth has had a profound impact on the life of humanity. Whatever you think of that impact, to deny it would be a bit like being a paid up member of the flat-earth society, wouldn't it? It's just a fact. And yet, if you had witnessed the conditions of his birth in the squalor of that stable, or watched him die the death of the cursed on a Roman cross – I'm not sure any of us would have put any money on him becoming the central figure of human history.

And this book of Acts is really about explaining how that turnaround happened. And we've seen that one of the major reasons why that could happen is that the gospel – the good news of what Jesus has done for us through his life, death and resurrection, didn't stay as a kind of closed book, whose secrets were kept only by a bunch of Jewish men in 1st Century Palestine. But that gospel spread outwards, and it had this power to reach into different cultures and contexts.

And this passage we're looking at this week – which is part 2 of last week – is all about how the message of Jesus first came to the Gentiles – how it broke out of being a for-Jewish people only thing – and started spreading among all sorts of non-Jewish people. And it all began with the conversion of this Roman soldier Cornelius and his family.

And so it's kind of fitting that we get to this passage on the day of Pentecost. Because, if you don't know, Pentecost is the day when the church traditionally remembers the time the Holy Spirit first came upon the church at Jerusalem. And today we're looking at when the Spirit first came upon Gentiles.

But of course the church didn't invent Pentecost. Pentecost was the Jewish feast that happened 50 days – Pente-cost – after the feast of Passover. And it was the feast that marked the completion of the barley harvest – it started on the day when the sickle was first put to the grain, and the harvest was brought in.

And as we're going to see, the Holy Spirit is absolutely crucial, then and now, to the bringing in of the harvest – not of barley – but of people, and in seeing the gospel spread.

The Spirit and the Gospel:
Now, just to remind you, Peter is in the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. But Peter's a Jew, and to put it mildly, Jews did not generally hang out with Gentiles, let alone Roman Centurions. I mean some of you boys are probably still

at that 'girls? –Yuk' stage, 'who wants to be seen with a girl', but this was much worse. In fact, as we saw last week, it has taken angelic visitations and visions from heaven to get these two men together. But now they are together, Cornelius wants to hear what Peter has to say: v33, "We are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

So, Peter is all set. He's got this captive audience, who are hanging on his words. He's had an angel as his warm-up act, and he can say anything he wants to them. He can tell them the things he thinks are most important, without holding anything back.

So what does he tell them? He tells them about Jesus. He doesn't tell them, first of all about the Holy Spirit. He tells them the gospel. He tells them what God has done through Jesus. That's his message: the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus. So, what theologians have come to call the Gentile Pentecost – the outpouring of the Spirit on Gentiles – was not preceded by Peter saying, 'let me tell you about the Spirit', but by Peter telling Cornelius and his family: 'let me tell you about Jesus and what God has done through him', and that's what sets up this whole outpouring of the Spirit.

And listen to what he says about Jesus. Verse 38: 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.' Now if you remember, Jesus began his ministry by quoting the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19).

And so if the first thing we can say is that Peter's laser-like focus was on Jesus and the gospel, the second thing we can say is that the anointing of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life was all about empowering the works of the gospel in his life. Listen to how Peter summarises it for Cornelius, v38, "He [Jesus] went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him."

So, this anointing of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life resulted in him doing good – bringing healing and wholeness to people's lives, freeing people from the oppression of the devil, the tyranny of darkness. But you could hear that and to our 21st Century ears there's this immediate disconnect, because few of us would say we felt oppressed by the powers of darkness. But maybe the tactics of darkness have changed – at least in the West. You see, in Jesus' day, his confrontation with evil was very visible, it was obvious, it was loud and demons were coming out all over the place. But maybe in our day the form of this oppression has changed, and it's all much more subtle.

We can be so caught up with work or our stuff that we don't have the time or the head-space to think about what life is really about. We live life at full pelt, cramming every day, without realising that the days left to us are growing shorter. And so there is a sense in which we are blinded by darkness without

even knowing it. Because it is a sugar-coated tyranny, because at the time, this one feels good to swallow.

Or we are robbed of inner peace. We see stuff going on in our own hearts, in our attitudes to others, or besetting sins that we are struggling with, and we feel powerless to change, and are left stewed up on the inside. Or our relationships are in breakdown and the ground of our lives is strewn with one corpse of a relationship after another. Or we hunger for meaning on the inside – but can't seem to find it. And so, sure we may not know the kind of oppression of darkness that happened in previous centuries, but that we can be oppressed by darkness is beyond doubt. It's just the tactics and the symptoms have changed.

But into that darkness and chaos, Jesus shines his light and brings his order. And he did that, Peter said, by 'preaching good news of peace' (v36). So the anointing of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life resulted in him proclaiming good news. In his own words, quoting Isaiah, good news for the poor, not just the physically poor, but the spiritually poor. Those who know they need to find peace with God, and know they don't have it. People like you and me. And Jesus said, I'm the doorway to that peace.

Now you can hear that and think that Jesus was some kind of proto-hippie, because plenty of other religious teachers have made similar promises, haven't they? Follow my example, obey my teaching, make love not war, and you'll find peace. But Jesus did more than just talk peace.

You see, right at the centre of Peter's message here to Cornelius is the cross: v39, 'They put him [Jesus] to death by hanging him on a tree.' Now why does Peter put it that way – 'hanging him on a tree'? Why not just say 'cross'? Well, remember who Peter's talking to: a Roman centurion who would have known all about crucifixion. But Cornelius was also a God-fearer, Luke tells us. A Gentile who would regularly attend the Synagogue and listen to the Jewish law being read. And so he would have known, as well as any Jew would have known, that execution by crucifixion had this appalling stigma attached to it. It was the death of the cursed, because Moses wrote that anyone who is hung on a tree 'is cursed by God' (Deut 21:23).

And so Jesus did more than talk peace, he obtained peace for us, because at the cross he took upon himself all our sin, all our shame, all our guilt, and bore the curse of separation and alienation from God that we deserve, that instead we might know forgiveness and the peace which comes with that. It's why the writer to Hebrews wrote, 'How much more will the blood of Christ who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience' (Heb 9:14).

So because of Jesus, you don't need to be wracked by a guilty conscience for all the things you've done that you shouldn't have done, or all the things you've left undone that you should have done. Instead we can know a deep inner peace: peace with God, peace with ourselves, and peace with others, because, anointed by the Holy Spirit, Jesus gave himself for us.

But, if Peter's focus was Jesus and the gospel, and if right at the centre of the Gospel was the cross, the good news doesn't stop at the cross.

Peter says, v39-40, that 'they put him to death… but God raised him on the third day.' Because the only way you know that Jesus really has secured the peace we all need is if God gives him the thumbs up, and vindicates him, and that's exactly what God does by raising him up. Now, you might hear that and think – 'o come on, you can't really believe Jesus was physically raised from the dead?' Well, look what Peter tells Cornelius, v40-1, "God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."

Now why does Peter say that? Why bother telling Cornelius 'you know what, we had breakfast with him, we sat down to lunch with Jesus' after the resurrection. Because Peter knows, and Cornelius knows, that the dead don't rise. You see, all these years later we can engage in what CS Lewis called 'chronological snobbery'. We think we know so much more than these uneducated, superstitious first century peasants. They might believe this stuff, but we're certainly not going to be taken in. But these guys are no more willing to just swallow the idea that someone has been raised from the dead than we are. So Peter is saying, listen, I know this sounds incredible, but we saw him die, and we saw him alive again, and no we weren't imagining it, it wasn't a dream, he wasn't a spook, this wasn't some kind of ghostly apparition, we ate and drank with him.

And from the very first Pentecost, that was the message that Peter and the other disciples were empowered by the Spirit to proclaim. A message not first of all about the Spirit, but about Jesus. Because the Spirit is like this great floodlight, this powerful spotlight, that doesn't shine for His own sake, but that shines his beam on Christ.

Now, every one of us has to decide how we're going to respond to that message about Jesus and the call to repent and put our trust in him. But for Peter he didn't even get a chance to ask his listeners how they wanted to respond.

The Spirit and Us

Now, I reckon that one of the most annoying and frustrating things is when someone keeps interrupting you. You're trying to explain something to your mum or your dad, or your colleague, or you daughter and they won't let you finish your sentence, they just keep butting in.

And that's just what Peter experiences here – it's just the one doing the interrupting is the Holy Spirit. And how often is that the case? We have things all sorted, we know how our lives or this situation should work out, but God has other ideas and he interrupts it all.

And Peter is in full flow. When he has to account for his actions back in Jerusalem he says that he had only just begun to warm to this theme about Jesus, when the

Spirit comes and butts in. And there are three things we can learn about the Holy Spirit from what goes on here in Cornelius' living room.

Firstly, we need him. Now, we're an independent kind of bunch, aren't we? I mean many of you are here in Switzerland because you're successful, and resourceful, and have a 'can-do' mentality. And so, when Peter opens his talk and says in v35 that, 'in every nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to him', we can be tempted to read that as – ok, so it's possible for me to do what's right, to work hard, to be devout, to have my life in order, and impress God in someway and make myself acceptable to God. And we translate our can-do mentality to the field of religion.

But that's not how it works here, is it? Because if Cornelius could save himself, if his own exemplary moral goodness and uprightness which we saw last week was enough, if applying himself to life and religion with all the energy that he had done was sufficient, why was there a need for Peter to come and tell him about Jesus in the first place? And if some kind of merely intellectual agreement to the truth of what Peter was saying was enough, why the need for the Spirit to come upon them as he did?

Instead, Peter tells them, everyone who believes in Jesus, who puts their faith in Jesus and in his 'has-done' and 'can-do', rather than their own, receives forgiveness. And Cornelius and his crew do that; Luke tells us they 'heard the word' (v44) – and the Spirit fell on them. And elsewhere the apostle Paul tells us that all who have put their trust in Jesus have this same Spirit living in them, because it's him who makes us alive, it's him who in the moment we believe brings about this incredible change of heart in our lives that Jesus describes as like being born again.

And Peter's fellow Jewish Christians who were with him were amazed – they were gobsmacked, Luke tells us, that the Spirit would come on Gentiles, because they were probably thinking, they're going to have to become Jews first, they're going to have to be circumcised and obey these extra rules. They're going to have to do something extra to be acceptable to God. And God the Holy Spirit just bypasses it all. Because it's not more of their own effort that they need – it's faith in Christ and the Holy Spirit making them truly alive that they need.

But the second thing this event tells us, is that ***the Spirit unites, he doesn't divide.*** Now I say that because you don't have to be around churches for long before you realise Christians disagree on stuff to do with the Spirit – not least whether all his gifts that we see in the Bible are for today. And in Westlake we have people from across the spectrum. But look what's going on here. Peter asks in v47, "Can anyone withhold water for baptising these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' And in v17 when he has to make his defence, he says, "God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ." In other words – the Holy Spirit is the great unifier, not some dark divider. God takes Jews and Gentiles, and you and me from multiple nations and backgrounds, and gives us all the same gift of His Spirit. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, 'For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or

Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit' (1 Cor 12:13). And Peter commands these Roman Gentiles to be baptised, because baptism in water is this outward sign of what God has done on the inside through the baptism of the Spirit. He gives us new life, but he also makes us members of one united body, his church.

And that's a good place for me to say that if you've put your faith in Jesus, and you've not yet been baptised in water but want to be, come and see me after, and we'll arrange some baptisms in the lake over the summer.

But the third thing this event tells us about the Holy Spirit is that his ***gifts are for magnifying God and building up the body, and we all have a role to play in that.*** Listen to how Luke puts it. The Jewish Christians are stunned that the Spirit came on these Gentiles, v46, 'For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God.' So the Spirit comes upon these very normal people, and they start speaking in tongues, and glorifying God. And that's what the Spirit does. His gifts, his equipping of Christians, is not so that they look good or draw attention to themselves – it's so that God get's glorified and Jesus is made to look great. That Jesus and his grace and his greatness come more and more into the forefront of the picture, and we fall more and more into the background.

But the fact that these Roman Gentiles get given this gift of the Holy Spirit tells us that they too have a role to play in the spread of the gospel, and so do you and I. And the Spirit gives his gifts, and he equips God's people, to glorify God by building up the church, and seeing the gospel spread.

But, of course, not everyone was quite so happy about what happened in Cornelius' front room. Last point, just briefly:

Don't Stand in the Way

And news of what has happened with these Gentiles starts spreading, and it gets back to Jerusalem before Peter does. And Peter is in for some flack. Luke says in v2 that 'the circumcision party criticised him' – and this is likely a group within the church at Jerusalem – who remember were still all Jews – who were especially vocal about the need for any Gentiles who want to become Christians to first become Jews, be circumcised and obey the law of Moses. And their criticism is especially that Peter went in to these Gentiles and actually ate with them – that Peter had stepped over this boundary – he had blurred the line of what it meant to be one of God's people.

But first off, notice how Peter reacts to that criticism. He doesn't say – 'o stuff you lot, this is clearly what the Holy Spirit is doing, if you can't see that I'm out of here.' Despite the fact that he has so clearly seen the Holy Spirit at work, Peter demonstrates this humility to seek the consent and the approval of his brothers and sisters in the church in Jerusalem. He sees himself in some way as accountable to them. And so he tells them the chain of events that happened, so he can help them make sense of it all.

And Peter's point is that from beginning to end it was God who directed the whole thing. God started it, he ended it and he was the prime mover throughout. Everyone else was just playing catch-up. And Peter ends his defence by saying, v17, 'If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?' And that question was met first by silence, and then by praise as the church realised that the boundaries of God's grace in Jesus were infinitely wider than any of them could imagine. Suddenly the world has got bigger.

You see, Peter had realised that God was on a mission – to see people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation come into his new people in Christ. And Peter had realised that for all his own cultural hang-ups, he didn't want to stand in the way of God doing that. Because tragically, it is possible to get in the way of that, and God ends up having to bypass you. You see, the danger as churches and as individuals is that we fail to embrace what God is doing in this world – that he is a missionary God - and instead we allow a subtle kind of racism to lodge in our hearts, and we look down on those who are different from us – we don't see them as people for whom Christ has died; or we prefer the status quo in our churches, we like things as they are, because it feels safer and more comfortable than all the new people and the messiness and uncertainty that happens when we join in God's mission to see the good news of Jesus spreading outwards.

But when we understand the gospel – as Peter was beginning to understand it- that God has stretched out his hand to rescue us, and Jesus had come to a hostile world to save us, by laying down his life for us, then, like Peter, we're not going to want to stand in the way of seeing that salvation and that grace multiply. Instead we're going to want to get in step with God, and filled with the Spirit, with the word of Christ, the gospel dwelling in us richly as Paul puts it in Colossians, we're going to mobilise all our energy and ingenuity and humble creativity, to see that Gospel spread.