

# Followers of the Way

## Are You Ready? - Learning from Peter's Sermon at Pentecost

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### Acts 2:22-41

A member of the Royal family was leaving one of the great worship centres of England and said to the presiding minister, someone high up in the hierarchy of the CofE, 'Is it true there is a hell?'

The minister replied, 'Your Highness, Jesus taught so, the Church has always believed so, and the Creeds teach so.'

The response came back, 'Then why, in the name of God, will you not say so?'

Be ready! We have heard Philip tell us what it means to be ready using the example of the prophet Jeremiah; David told us last week how we must prepare ourselves by being holy and living in obedience. This morning we are looking at how we need to tell others to be ready.

Rico Tice – *Honest Evangelism*, 'I find evangelism hard.' P.11 That is some confession from one whose profession is an evangelist. He became a Christian, aged 16, and at once began to share his faith at school. He got a very hard time, his fellow pupils mocked him endlessly until he ended up in tears, and yet it did not deter him.

In the book, he says we must be prepared to cross the painline, for if we share our faith in Jesus Christ, we are going to get hurt. We'll come back to Rico.

We are going to use Peter's first sermon on the Day of Pentecost to help us tell others of their need to be ready.

### 1. Approach People Where They Are

Peter's audience on the Day of Pentecost were Torah observant Jews who had travelled from all over the world to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks. Since the Babylonian Exile, Jews were no longer confined only to the Land of Promise but found scattered all across the then known world.

These Jews from the Diaspora, though living in foreign lands and under various different cultures, still regarded Jerusalem as the Holy City and tried, as often as possible, to attend the three major Feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.

So here they were, a heaving crowd milling around the temple courts, when all of a sudden they hear the sound of men declaring the praises of God, not in Hebrew, Greek or Aramaic, but in their own native languages. Their own Mother tongues!

They gathered around the disciples in amazement and perplexity asking, 'What does this mean?' These were the genuine seekers, however others mocked and ridiculed them, saying, 'They have had too much wine!' (vv.12-13) How familiar is that today when many mock and ridicule Christians for their beliefs?

Yet this was Peter's entry point. He stood up and declared, 'These men are not drunk as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!' (v.15) In other words, the pubs aren't even open yet! What they were witnessing that day was a fulfilment of the prophecy in Joel 2:28-32,

In the last days, God says,  
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,  
your young men will see visions,  
your old men will dream dreams. (v.17)

All those listening to Peter knew exactly what he was talking about. They lived by the Law, the Torah, they were familiar with the prophecies, they were expecting the Messiah. So Peter's approach of explaining the gospel, by quoting Scripture and showing how Jesus Christ is the fulfilment, is the correct one.

At other times the audience were a mix of Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16), or all pagans as in Athens (Acts 17:22-23). Each time, the approach and entry point was different according to the circumstance. For example, in Athens Paul used the altar 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD' as his starting point to lead them to Jesus.

Most of us were brought up in a generation where many attended Church, and Christianity undergirded much in our society.

Even those who weren't at Church knew something about our faith. That's why evangelists like Billy Graham and Luis Palau were so successful in their outreach.

The spiritual landscape today is so different. Many today don't even realise Christmas and Easter are about Jesus, as to them He is simply a swearword! We need to find the right approach and entry point, but we can if we watch and listen carefully: it may be through an illness or bereavement, a family crisis, someone bemoaning the state of the world, or even someone seeking for the meaning of life.

When we find the right approach, that will be our entry point to start telling them they need to be ready.

## **2. Use Scripture to Point to Jesus**

The opening words of the Bible are, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' (Gen 1:1) Deliberately echoed at the start of John's Gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word...' (John 1:1) God spoke the word and everything came into being.

The words we use are important, but the use of God's Word, the Holy Scriptures, is imperative. Without the Bible our words are simply that – *our* words. Whenever we talk to people and urge them to be ready, we need God's word because it alone has the power to touch people's hearts.

The apostles used Holy Scripture extensively in their preaching, but of course, the only Scripture they had is what we call the Old Testament. Peter gave three direct quotes from Scripture – Joel 2:28-32; Psalm 16:8-11 and Psalm 110:1.

He uses the prophecy of Joel to explain the phenomena of speaking in other languages, leading into a declaration of who Jesus is and about His death and Resurrection. The second quote from Ps 16 is to show proof of the Resurrection – ‘because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let you Holy One see decay.’ (v.27) Peter then gives an exposition of these verses –

Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. (vv.29-32)

Peter states that David, who wrote the Psalm, could not have been talking about himself as he died and his tomb was there in Jerusalem for all to see. No, he was looking ahead to the coming Messiah, who died but was not abandoned to the grave, instead He was raised to life of which Peter and all the apostles are witnesses, proof beyond doubt.

The third quote from Ps 110:1, one of the Messianic Psalms, speaks of Christ’s exaltation to the right hand of God, from where He poured out the Holy Spirit.

All the Scriptures used point to Jesus, and so they should. After all, Jesus himself used Scripture in this way. As He spoke to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, ‘...beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.’ (Luke 24:27)

All Scripture points to Jesus, so we would do well to memorize certain verses or portions to use in sharing with others, e.g. John 3:16; Isa 53; the Roman Road etc.

Those we speak to may not believe in the Bible, but *we* do and we know it is living and active, sharper than a double-edged sword, and the gospel it contains is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes. *Our* words cannot save anyone, but God’s word can, and that’s why we must use it to point them to Jesus and ensure they are ready for His return.

### **3. Issue a Challenge**

As an agnostic law student, Josh McDowell set about gathering evidence in order to refute Christianity. Instead, he found the evidence so compelling that he came to accept that Christianity was true.

However, he said it was only when what he knew in his head touched his heart that he became a believer.

We can convince someone about the truth of Christianity: about Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension and even His future return to judge the living and the dead. But until that person realises the significance of it to their own life, in other words allows what they know in their heads to touch their hearts, it will be to no avail.

So we need to issue them a challenge. For Peter this was easy because his audience, who were cut to the heart, asked, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' (v.37) This gave the apostle the ideal opening to lay down his challenge in v.38

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.

And as we know 3,000 were saved and became ready that day.

It's not often we hear someone saying, as Peter's audience did, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' In 30 years of ordained ministry I have only experienced that once.

Three weeks into being appointed rector of my first parish, Tobermore, Co Londonderry, and even before we moved into the village, I received a phone call one night from a distraught husband whose wife had been crying constantly for a fortnight.

She was under the conviction of the Holy Spirit and needed to be saved, but didn't know what to do. So armed with a Bible and some tracts, I travelled the 26 miles to their home. I read some verses with her and led her in the sinner's prayer, and there and then she became a Christian and was ready. And 28 years later she is still going on with the Lord.

Believe me this is rare, most of the time we have to issue the challenge for people to respond. After gaining the entry point to get a hearing, then using Scripture to point to Jesus – the only One who can save and get us ready for the coming judgement – we need to issue a challenge, something like: 'What do you think about that? Does that make sense to you? Are you ready to take a step of faith?'

It will not always happen immediately, as it did with my parishioner, but it gives them something to think about, and allow the knowledge in their heads to touch their hearts and emotions.

There is an urgency, as we see in v.40, where we read, "With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'"

One further lesson we can learn from Peter which we find in the verses following his sermon -

#### **4. Let Your Life Speak**

We have spoken of how important the ministry of the word is; 'In the beginning was the Word' (Jn 1:1), but we also must remember 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' (Jn 1:14)

The 3,000 who were saved on the Day of Pentecost became the nucleus of the first Church and, as v.47 says, they enjoyed the favour of all the people. Something about the lives of those first Christians spoke to the people, and every day more were joining the Church.

When others know we are Christians, they will watch us, and watch closely. We need to ensure that what we say and how we live match up. Very often our lives, what we do and how we live, can speak even louder than the words we say.

Some years after his conversion, Rico Tice was driven to tears once more, not because of mockery this time, but through a letter he received from one of his fellow students. Here's what it said – p.22,

'I knew Rico at school, though not well - we were in different classes, though we played in the same cricket team. And I distinctly remember Rico's conversion at school. I suspect if you asked most of our contemporaries, they too would remember it, even though it was over 30 years ago. Why was it so memorable? For two reasons? Firstly, the merciless reaction shown towards Rico - the constant, public and private attempts to humiliate him and get him to relinquish his new found faith, which went on for many, many months.

Secondly, what really stuck with me was how Rico carried himself during such a difficult time for him. The easy option would have been to turn back or keep quiet, but Rico stuck to his faith and kept talking about his faith. Although I didn't realise this at the time, Rico's conversion and resolute faith sowed the first seed in my mind - who was it that gave Rico the strength to continue down such a difficult path (he surely could not have done this on his own). That was the first stage in my own journey, which many years later led me to Jesus.'<sup>1</sup>

May our prayer be that, as we ready ourselves, we will be prepared, no matter how painful it may be, to tell others, by our words and through our lives, their need to be ready for the coming of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Tice, Rico with Carl Laferton, Honest Evangelism, the Good Book Company, UK, 2015, p.22