

Cut to the heart

8 5 11

Almighty Father,
who in your great mercy gladdened the disciples
with the sight of the risen Lord:
give us such knowledge of his presence with us
that we may be strengthened and sustained by his risen life
and serve you continually in righteousness and truth

My text today may be found in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 2 and verse 37: 'Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers what shall we do?"'.

It is the Day of Pentecost. Peter and the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, are inspired to go out into the crowded streets of Jerusalem, full of foreign Jews thronging the capital for the pilgrim festival of Shavuot. There they share their enthusiasm with their brother Jews in words their hearers can understand just as if these Aramaic-speaking Galileans are in fact speaking the everyday language these foreigners speak. So Peter is moved to address the crowd to explain the phenomenon of glossolalia, speaking in tongues, something the cynics among the crowd dismiss as the apostles being drunk.

Peter's sermon is clear and strong and rooted in scripture and the experiences these men have shared. It is a simple statement of the truth: that the Messiah whom they all long for has in fact come and that he has been rejected and crucified. But to fulfil God's purpose for Mankind, God has raised him from dead on the third day. That man is Jesus of Nazareth and in part, they are each responsible for his death.

The effect on them is astonishing! Guilty of an offence of which they had been unaware, they feel close to despair, knowing not which way to turn nor what to do! It is a curious situation. The crowd clearly take their faith seriously – why else would they have come to Jerusalem for Shavuot? They would have been aware of the upset six weeks earlier with the death of a popular, miracle-working Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth. Now they were being told that this Jesus was their Messiah and that they somehow shared responsibility with those who had demanded Jesus' execution by the Roman authorities. If this were true, then it was a disaster on all fronts: the hope of their God rejected by God's own Chosen People. What was to become of them?

The phrase which describes their distress in the King James Bible is 'pricked to the heart'. 'Pricked' is a translation of the verb 'κατανύσσω' (katanusso) which our new Bibles, the NRSV, translates as 'cut'. The prime meaning of this Greek verb is 'to stab' or 'to pierce through' and as such it suggests the use of a sharp knife. The image used in the King James Bible suggests a stiletto blade: thin, pointed which, with a little pressure, will deeply penetrate our flesh. The image in the NRSV suggests a dagger whose blade is razor sharp which, with sufficient force,

can cut deep. The target of both is our heart, καρδιά (kardia): the seat of our emotions. It is an effective image of someone, any one of us, being affected by the truth of something, being overwhelmed by the feeling of guilt for a wrong we have done. And in their distress at the acceptance of their collective guilt, they ask Peter what they must individually do. Peter replies 'Repent and be baptised'. The message is simple: to repent is to admit wrong-doing and to be sorry and to be willing to try to do better in future.

Christianity is a faith which embodies forgiveness and there is no better example of the readiness of Jesus to forgive those who repent than the Easter story of Jesus speaking to Peter after breakfast of fish on the shores of a lakeside by a charcoal fire. Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him; three times Peter affirms he does. Each question and each affirmation cancels out the threefold denial Peter carelessly uttered during that dark night of Jesus' arrest when standing in the dark and the cold by another charcoal fire, Peter lost his nerve and vehemently swore that he did not know his friend, the man he loved and respected.

Easter contains this unequivocal promise: that through belief in Christ our sins can be forgiven and the consequence of wrong-doing can be cancelled through the fact of the empty tomb. The crowd in desperation asked Peter what they should do. And he told them. He told them what he had discovered for himself: the need to repent: to regret past wrongs and to try to better in future. Peter did; the crowd wanted to; and what about us?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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H: Sermon 23: Cut to the heart

