

Previewing God's great plan
Kingham & Churchill Pentecost 2009
Readings: John 14:15-27; Acts 2:1-21

Introduction

"Solomon Grundy, born on Monday, christened on Tuesday, married on Wednesday, took ill on Thursday, worse on Friday, died on Saturday, buried on Sunday. And this is the end of Solomon Grundy."

Is that all there is to your life?

It is what many think, and for the life of me I can't see what gets them out of bed in the morning.

Or take the atheist Bertrand Russell - listen to what got him out of bed:

"Man is the product of causes which have no pre-vision of the end they were achieving. That his origin, his hope & fears, his love & beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocation of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling can preserve the individual life beyond the grave"

He goes on like that for some while before concluding..

"All these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."

Are you building your life on "unyielding despair"?

Richard Dawkins, another atheist, says what he thinks of believers:

"You are fundamentally cowards who can't bear to look into the void and see nothing there."

Is that true of you, if you think God has a purpose to life?

Well, what's this got to do with Pentecost?

And the answer is to do with the question the crowds were asking in Acts 2v12.

The setting is Jerusalem where the apostles are gathered together shortly after Jesus had returned to Heaven.

It's somewhere public, because crowds see what happens.

And what does happen?

First an extraordinary noise, much like a storm-force gale.

Then an extraordinary spectacle, like the Northern Lights, except the tongues of fire rest on each of the apostles.

And then an extraordinary event, as these ill-educated northerners start preaching in different languages, so that every foreigner there had no need of a translation.

Three signs and wonders in the space of just a few minutes.

No wonder we read in v12: "Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, 'What does this mean?'"

That's the question I want to address today.

What does it all mean, for you and me, here, today?

Or is it all meaningless?

And the answer the crowds are given by the apostles and especially Peter, is this:

Pentecost means God has a clear plan for his world, centring on Jesus Christ; and you can have a part in God's plan.

God has a clear plan for his world

Look at God's plan as Jesus lays it out in chapter 1v4.

"On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.'"

Pause!

Did you notice that Jesus had already told them about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit?

Was he referring to what he said at the last supper about sending 'the Spirit of truth', to teach & remind them?

Or was it his teaching after the resurrection concerning everything written about him in the Old Testament?

Let's continue:

v8 "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

That's the plan, there, did you spot it!

That 'the ends of the earth' will learn the truth about Jesus.

And God's Holy Spirit will be the one who will empower them to do just that, to set the truth about Jesus echoing round the world.

That's God's plan.

He's been quite clear about it throughout Scripture.

So Pentecost is like a preview or foretaste of God's great plan for a worldwide church.

A preview of when Jesus' commission to the apostles in chapter 1v8 has gone: "to the ends of the earth."

And so, throughout the book of Acts, we see the gospel taken throughout the Roman empire, and the books ends with the gospel still heading outwards.

And today it's still going to the ends of the earth, as the Christian church continues to grow exponentially.

And where will it end?

Here, prophesied in the last book of the Bible, Revelation chapter 7v9:

"I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

Don't you want to be there on that day?

Just as Christ's resurrection previews our resurrection, so Pentecost previews that great day of praise of God by people from all over the world.

God's plan will culminate in that day; Pentecost previews it.

I'm not sure I'd seen that so clearly until this week.

So look at what Peter tells the crowd about God's plan.

Some jokers say 'They have had too much wine.'

But Peter says "No", in v16 "this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:"

'If you want to understand what's going on,' he's saying, 'read your Old Testaments!'

God gave this prophecy that Peter quotes to Joel around 800 B.C.

So God's plan was on paper at least 800 years before!

That's important – because this isn't God's emergency backup plan 2b, which he has had to quickly come up with when everything went wrong and his son got himself crucified.

No, this is God's great plan from the beginning.

Revelation talks of Jesus as "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world."

This is, and always has been, God's purpose for his world!

So look at how Peter starts the quote from Joel in v17:

"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit..."

So God's plan includes a period of time that he calls 'the last days', in which you and I are living today.

The 'last days' began with Jesus' ascension, and elsewhere we discover that they will end when Jesus returns.

But these last days that we live in will be different from what went before.

How so?

Read on: "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. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

So three things will epitomise the last days we're living in.

One, all of God's people will have his Holy Spirit.

Two, during the last days, v21, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

And three, the last days will end with cosmic catastrophe before 'the great and glorious day of the Lord'.

Now, let's think ourselves clear about this prophecy thing.

I've heard talks where people have tried to explain the difference between sons & daughters prophesying, young men having visions and old men dreaming dreams.

They get a bit stuck if there were any old women there!

No, that can't be right.

Because it ignores the way Hebrew poetry like Joel is so often written, in what is called parallelism.

When you read your Old Testament you'll often find the same thing repeated, in different words, to stress the point.

So Joel chapter 2 means that the Holy Spirit will be poured out on all kinds of people – male, female, young, old – and all will have the one same experience, called prophecy, visions and dreams.

So this is not talking about the spiritual gift of prophecy, because the New Testament clearly says not all will have that gift.

Not yet convinced?

Well, ask yourself this: 'How did God reveal things to the Old Testament prophets?'

You will find the answer set out very clearly for us by God in the book of Numbers, chapter 12.

Let me read it to you: God is speaking.

"When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams."

See, one communication method: dreams & visions, one while asleep, one while awake.

And God then says that the only exception to this rule was Moses, with whom he spoke face to face.

How will God reveal himself in the 'last days'?

Not just to a few special people, occasionally.

But to all kinds of people, all the time, as "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Which is exactly what we're seeing around the world.

And even, in a small way, what we're seeing in our villages as young and old, male and female, come to know the Lord for themselves.

God has a clear plan for his world.

And that plan is to reveal himself to countless people, of all types, and gather a people together who will praise him as he, and what he has done centred on the Lord Jesus Christ, become known 'to the ends of the earth'.

Therefore... You can have a part in that plan

Second point; I've only got two!

God's plan is not just a remote, irrelevant thing.

Pentecost, as Peter goes on to say, is all about the fact that you and I can have a part in that plan.

In fact, that is the plan, for people like you and me to be part of it!

The multinational crowd has just heard the apostles, v11, "declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"

Peter says this is God's plan from the prophecy of Joel.

And then he hits them with the personal challenge of v22:

“Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.”

I pick it up at v32: “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.

Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.”

Notice that Peter doesn't try to convince the crowds that Jesus really had died and risen from the dead.

It seems as though that was widely known in Jerusalem.

Of course, you and I today will often need to make a case for Jesus' resurrection when we talk to non-Christians.

They may not realise it is an historical fact.

And if you aren't able to do that with a reasonable degree of confidence, then a bit of work is all that's needed.

Ask one of the ministers to guide you to some helpful stuff so that you can explain the hope that is in you.

All Peter had to do was to explain what Jesus' resurrection and the phenomena they had all just experienced meant.

Which he has done very clearly and succinctly.

And he concludes with a flourish at verse 36: “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

That could only have ended one of two ways!

The one that didn't happen was a mob lynching!

The one that did happen, was v37: “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’”

It may be that there are some here today for whom the idea that God has a plan for his world and for your life is new.

But if you're honest, deep down you have always known a longing for meaning and purpose.

If that's you, then please ask yourself if your life is really better than that offered by Jesus.

A life of forgiveness, a new start, a purpose and a relationship with the God who made you, eternal life.

Peter doesn't leave them high and dry, and nor will I you.

He tells them that what they should do is very simple.

v38: “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.”

It really is that simple, so why not ask afterwards about becoming a Christian and taking your part in God's plan.

But to you Christians, what is the challenge of Pentecost?

Well, this is the great plan we're called into.

Not in exactly the same way as the 12 apostles, of course.

But we are all called to be part of the Holy Spirit's enduring work in the world, which is to make himself and his Christ known everywhere, even here in our villages, among your neighbours.

Are you really on board with that task today?

Have you realised that you need to be, that it's God's plan and purpose for your life.

To help fulfil his plan, his great commission first given to those few and now spread to around 2 billion worldwide.

I pray that acts 2:11 will be a kind of motto for our church, in our villages and in our time: people saying “we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

Pentecost is an encouragement to us as a church to be telling others about Jesus, in words and ways that those we meet can understand.

That's the privilege that he calls us to be part of.

God has a glorious plan and he wants us to be part of it.

And he's given us his Holy Spirit to enable us to carry it out.

Come on, let's all get on board and get on with it!

Prayer (do business)