

## Sermon: Acts 2: 1-21 31<sup>st</sup> May 2020

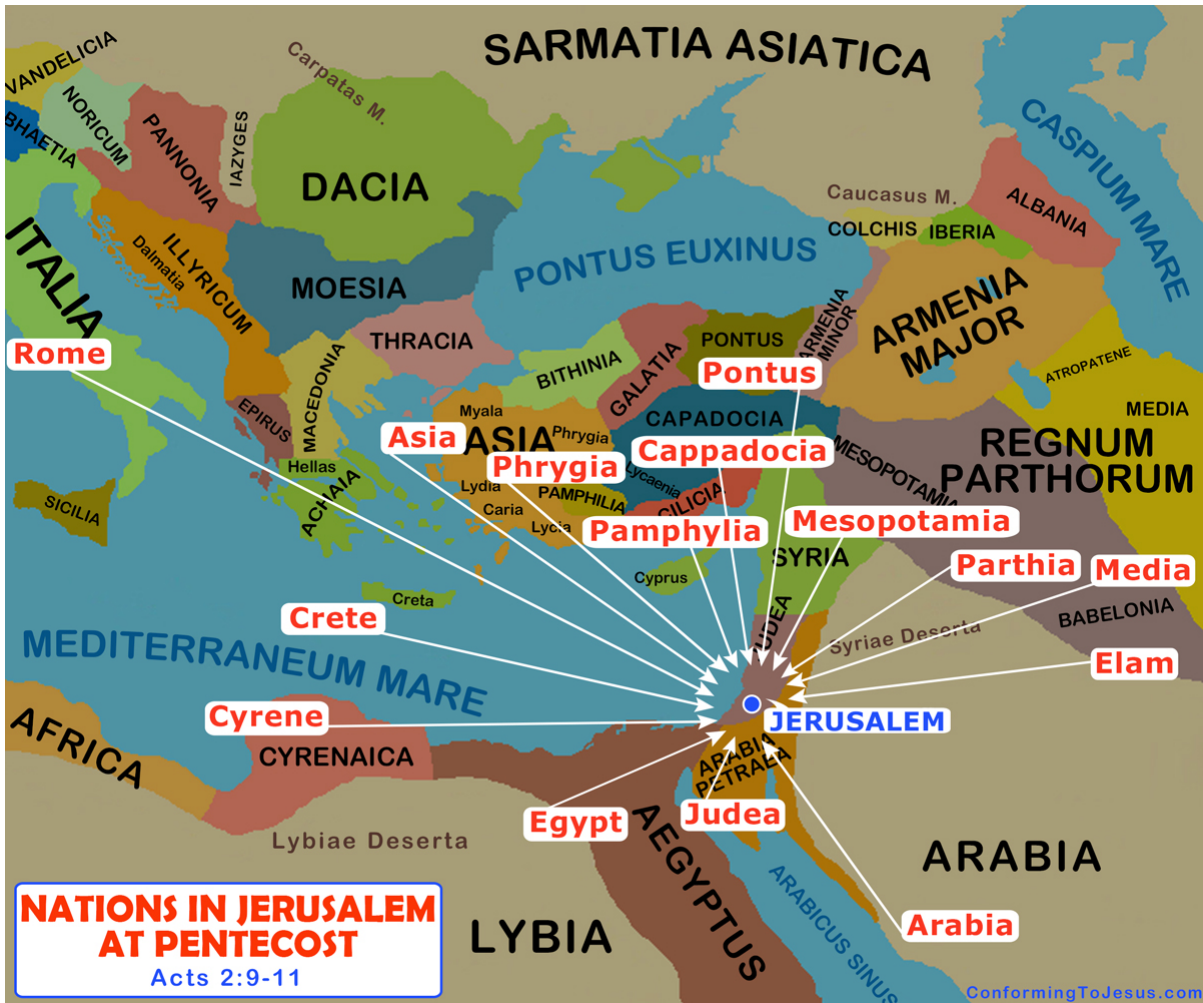
Imagine yourself to be one of the disciples who had lived with Jesus and shared his ministry. For example, imagine what it was like to be Peter. At the point where Jesus called him, he was a fisherman. Fishing was his world and was what defined him. That all changed in the three years he spent with Jesus. He was there when Jesus performed miracles. He absorbed Jesus' teaching, both in what Jesus said, what he did and how he related to everyone in society. He saw how Jesus did not shy away from those at the margins of society and how he had incisive words that challenged the hypocrisy of those at the top. All this eventually enabled Peter to recognise Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Peter knew he was sharing the life of the most important man ever to have lived and who had a world-changing mission to complete. And then, suddenly, all that was taken away. Jesus was crucified, dead and buried and everything came to a shuddering stop. But then, two days later Jesus was back. That was going to take some explaining. Jesus thereafter appeared periodically to groups of disciples in various places, unhindered by great distances or locked doors.

If you or I had been Peter, how would we have made sense of that? How would we have coped with the rollercoaster of having our hopes raised and dashed and raised again but with little sense of what any of it meant? What would it have been like to have been given a sense of purpose and then to have that ripped away and replaced by confusion? It does not surprise me that a few days after the resurrection, in John chapter 21, Peter, announced, "I am going fishing." He and some of the other disciples went back to something that was uncomplicated and made sense in a way that everything else in their lives at that point simply did not.

Around that time Jesus commanded the disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait to be baptised with the Holy Spirit, and that is where we pick things up in today's reading from Acts chapter 2. The account of the coming of the Holy Spirit is very dramatic: the sound of a violent wind, tongues of flame resting on each person and then the experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit; and then the supercharged disciples spilling out onto the street speaking in foreign languages such that tens of thousands of people from at least fifteen different nations heard the gospel preached in their own language. About three thousand people accepted the message and were baptised. There was a major festival going on in Jerusalem and the city was jam-packed with Jewish visitors from all over the place. That list of fifteen regions in verses 9 -11 covers much of the rim of the Mediterranean and then further east into Arabia. After the festival, those visitors went back to their home countries and took the seeds of the gospel with them. To use a modern phrase, this was a "super-spreading incident." That passage records the birth of the church. It is when Christianity ignited. For the disciples, there was no going back. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, they had fresh purpose, their lives were committed to living the gospel, spreading the gospel and bringing in the kingdom of God. Fishing no longer defined Peter.

What about us? Here we are in the middle of the pandemic. People worldwide are suffering with, or risking, life-threatening illness and loss of employment. The old certainties have disappeared. It is a paradoxical mixture of hopelessness and hope. For many people, their lives are on hold and their sense of purpose is gone, yet others are discovering a new sense of purpose.

How many times have you heard someone say, "I wish this pandemic were over and we could get back to normal?" Well, this morning, I would like us to ask, "Is normal what we actually want?" Think about pre-pandemic normality in this country. We had, and still have, huge disparities in wealth, education, health, lifespan, life-opportunities together with decreasing social mobility and these things are mostly determined by the accident of where and to whom one is born. For a long time government policy, informed by powerful interests, has forced things along this path.



[https://www.conformingtojesus.com/charts-maps/en/nations\\_at\\_pentecost\\_acts\\_2\\_map.htm](https://www.conformingtojesus.com/charts-maps/en/nations_at_pentecost_acts_2_map.htm)

Layered on top of that we have the whole world teetering on the cliff-edge of an ecological catastrophe that will make the corona virus pandemic look like a walk in the park. The pandemic has simply shone a spotlight on these inequalities. The corona virus can infect anyone, but those of us who can comfortably work from home and have a garden to relax in are much better placed than folk in sub-standard accommodation who have to risk unsafe workplaces and public transport. And if we look at the profiles of those who have died from the virus we can see that certain ethnicities predominate, particularly those with poverty-related co-morbidities.

We go out on Thursday nights to clap the NHS and care sector workers, many of whom have been putting their lives at risk for a pittance on a daily basis with inadequate PPE. Perhaps we should also be clapping the folk who have serviced the lockdown at risk to themselves - the delivery drivers, the shop assistants, the bin men and all the rest. There are many groups in society that are not valued, as measured by the zero-hours contract or the minimum wage that they receive, but the lockdown has spotlighted just how much we rely upon them.

Right now there is a huge opportunity to jog society in the right direction, and by that I mean towards a society where everyone is valued and cared for, a society that will more and more conform to the ideals of the kingdom of God. We have been clapping the NHS, but there was a time within living memory when there was no NHS. Everyone claps the NHS now, but at its inception there were powerful interests that resisted it. It took the foresight and sustained action of key people and the gross upheaval of the second world war to bring it to birth. In the middle of the war, Beveridge set out in his report a plan to put an end

to the 'five giants' – Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness. The giant of Disease was addressed by the founding of the NHS after the war and variable success has been achieved since against the other giants. At the time, to our shame, the giants of Racism and Sexism managed slip through the net.

To use the war analogy, if we are fighting a war against COVID-19, we need also to look to winning the peace. We are in the greatest worldwide upheaval in my lifetime. All the pieces are up in the air and right now, anything, for good or for ill is possible. It is a moment of immense possibility. As the pandemic eventually shudders to an end and as the pieces begin to fall down, how do we want them to land? I hope that as Christians, we would want better than the old "normal", that we would want a fairer and sustainable society with equal opportunity, not only here but also across the world. That needs people of vision and determination to spearhead the refashioning of the pieces into a new configuration and to push back against the powerful forces of interest that would seek to force the world back into its old unjust pattern. But from where is this vision to come? I suggest that we grasp the prophecy of Joel that Peter quoted in today's reading from Acts 2.

"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."

Remember Dr Martin Luther King's defining "I have a dream" speech? He had an inspired dream of racial equality born out of his understanding of the gospel. He pursued his dream and was killed for it. Nevertheless, he and his co-dreamers made huge positive changes to American society and Dr King will always be remembered.

Now it is our turn. We need to imagine how the world could be. What is your dream for society and the world and how could you be part of making it happen? We need to take the time to dream, to allow the Holy Spirit to inspire us and to unite us with other people of goodwill, so that together we can bring the dream to reality.

As we strive to be committed to living the gospel, spreading the gospel and bringing in the kingdom of God, let us pray that the Holy Spirit would indeed be poured out upon us to inspire our dreams and our actions so that we might fulfil the Lord's prayer: *Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

Amen

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Suggested further reading from *GreenChristian* with an emphasis on post-pandemic societal and ecological issues

<https://radicalpresence.org.uk/>

<https://radicalpresence.org.uk/before-starting/>

The aim of Radical Presence is to engage Christians and fellow seekers in creative inquiry, both prayerful and critical, about the kind of society we want to build as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic.