

Second Sunday of Easter

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During the Sundays of Eastertide, instead of a first reading from the Old Testament, we read selections from the Acts of the Apostles; the history of the early Church following Jesus' resurrection. It is a custom designed to mark out the significance of the resurrection season of our year and to help us understand something of the experience of the early Christians.

Today we read from chapter 2. In the overall context of Acts that means we are reading Peter's address to those gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. The crowd have just heard the "sound like the rush of a violent wind" [Acts 2.2] and witnessed the "divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among" [Acts 2.3] the Apostles. (We will read this account when we celebrate Pentecost on 28th May.) What we have heard read today follows this.

Recently, at the National Bishops' Conference, the Australian Bishops shared in Bible Studies on significant themes. One of those was 'the Gospel'. What is the gospel? What is the good news that we Christians proclaim? Various Bishops offered particular biblical passages to express the essence of 'the Gospel.' What we have in today's reading from Acts is Peter proclaiming to his audience what he understands to be 'the Gospel.'

Peter's address begins by quoting from the prophet Joel – which has been omitted from today's passage – and in that he is connecting the history of God's actions towards his people, the Israelites, with the events of Jesus' death and resurrection leading to the gift of the Holy Spirit that the crowd have just witnessed. In this address, Peter makes several points that are fundamental to the Gospel message of Christian faith:

1. Peter uses the name "Jesus of Nazareth." [Acts 2.22] He connects him to his human origin; a fact that is critical in our understanding of salvation. Jesus is both human and divine. His presence and his life was in every sense the same experience of humanity that we have. Our context may be very different to that of 2000 years ago but the nature of human interaction and relationships has not changed.
2. Peter says he is "a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you." [Acts 2.22] In other words, one in and through whom God has been revealed and acted for the good of humanity.
3. Peter points out that the crucifixion happened "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" [Acts 2.23] Divine purpose was at work despite the self-

interested cruelty of those who sent Jesus to the cross. God's plan is revealed in what happened to Jesus – *“God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.”* [Acts 2.24] Interestingly, the Greek text here literally means *“freed him from (the pangs) of death.”* Pangs being a word associated with the birth of a child. This therefore infers Jesus, through death, inaugurates new life. Salvation follows this pattern.

4. Peter again speaks of human origin, but this time in terms of Jesus' ancestry as a descendant of King David. He quotes from Psalm 16 and one attributed to David's authorship. Here it is demonstrating that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises. However, unlike David, who remained bound to death in a tomb, God raised Jesus to new life. Peter is treating David's words as prophetic.

We must be careful here not to misunderstand this passage. When Luke records Peter's words he has him say to the Jews *“you crucified and killed”* [Acts 2.23] Jesus. It must be recognised that this is addressed, not to the Jewish nation as a whole, but to the leaders of Jewish people in Jesus' day as the ones who are culpable. But let us remember that the Roman authorities also bear the same culpability, so both Jews and Gentiles together are responsible for his death. The salvation that is new life wrought by Jesus is therefore good news for Jews and Gentiles alike.

We are presented with Peter's account of 'the Gospel.' This good news is ours to share, that Jesus – God's Son born of a human mother – lived our life, was one in and through whom God has been revealed and acted for the good of humanity, and died a death that inaugurated new life according to the plan and purpose of God to bring salvation to all.

This is indeed good News!

“... and of that all of us (who are baptised Christians) are witnesses.” [Acts 2.32]