

Third Sunday of Easter

Written by the Rt Rev'd Donald Kirk, Bishop of Riverina

The first reading today from the Acts of the Apostles continues Peter's address to the people in Jerusalem. We heard the beginning of that address last Sunday.

Today, we hear Peter say: *"Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."* [Acts 2.36] He is not holding back! Remember, last week he made it clear that their leaders, both Jewish and Gentile, were responsible for Jesus' death and the crowd were complicit in that decision. Now Peter lays this clearly at their feet. But he uses the name 'Messiah' to describe Jesus which, for the crowd, is the most confronting thing that he has said.

The name 'Messiah' comes out of deep Old Testament tradition where the Messiah was understood to be the promised deliverer of the Jewish nation to freedom. The word has Hebrew origin and the Greek equivalent is 'Christ'. Both words literally mean 'the Anointed One.'

This very large Jewish crowd gathered at Pentecost listening to Peter get the message that the one they have waited for over many generation, hoped for from ages past, they just killed! Little wonder *"they were cut to the heart"* [Acts 2.37] when they heard this. Yet Peter has already told them: *"This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses."* [Acts 2.32] So, there is hope, and they cling to this asking the obvious question: *"Brothers, what should we do?"* [Acts 2.37]

This is the very same question that the crowd asks John the Baptist at the beginning of Luke's Gospel as they hear him speak of preparing the way of the Lord. John was *"proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"* [Luke 3.3] and his answer was to demand acts of mercy: provide clothing and food for those who have none; to conduct their business honestly, and not be tempted by extortion. This is essentially a change of mind and heart.

The Biblical word for 'repentance' is 'metanoia.' It means a complete turn around in life as if we spin 180 degrees to go back to God rather than continuing on our own self-defined path. Often, such paths lead to greed encompassing selfishness, entitlement, materialism, consumerism, and hoarding. One can see in this context why repentance is such a change of mind and heart.

At the end of Luke's Gospel, the resurrected Jesus speaks to his disciples immediately before ascending into heaven and tells them: *"that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."* [Luke 24.47-48] So, John proclaims a baptism for repentance, and Jesus calls for repentance and forgiveness to be proclaimed. Peter makes sense of this for the fledgling Christian community when he tells the crowd: *"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."* [Acts 2.38]

There are four things placed together here that are important to us:

1. Repentance – that we are called continually to change our mind and heart to conform with God's will and desire for our wholeness. Sin is the cause of our need to repent. So often we conceive of sin as actions done and at times that is true, but sin is alienation from who we really are, our authentic self. Recognising this means sin is a condition, rather than action, that alienates us from God.
2. Baptism – that we are called to be baptised in the name of Jesus calling us to be followers of his way. Only in following Jesus does repentance make sense.
3. Forgiveness – that we receive through repentance and baptism. Forgiveness re-establishes belonging. Repentance, baptism and forgiveness unites us with Jesus Christ as God's people.
4. The Holy Spirit – that gift we receive uniquely in baptism. We have been moved from alienation to belonging and the Holy Spirit incorporates us into Holy Community. The Church called by Jesus Christ and commissioned for their task is made into a community, a place of belonging for all those who share the call of Jesus Christ and are sent out with the community's support to proclaim the message of Jesus to all nations.

Today's Acts reading concludes by telling us that about three thousand persons joined the early Christian community. As we remind ourselves that we are called to repentance, baptism and forgiveness, and have received the Holy Spirit, let us pray that the same Holy Spirit may work effectively through us to proclaim the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ to all people. May the Church be a community of safety and support for all nurturing and strengthening us for this mission.

