

Prayers

Opening prayer

Almighty God, You yearn for those who have turned away from You and You long to save them. May we therefore be careful, lest our words and deeds become a stumbling block to others, robbing them of the liberating power of faith and Your healing touch. Open our hearts to see the eternal consequences of all we do, so that we become reliable and worthy witnesses of the Gospel, throughout our days. We ask this in the name of Jesus; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: PREJUDICE

1. For yourself

Praise God for His generosity, and ask Him to bless you with the same open hearted generosity, which shows no favouritism to others

2. For your friends and family

Thank God for your many friends, forgive them for any prejudicial attitudes you have found in them over the years. If necessary seek restoration

3. For the church and its work

Give thanks to God for the faith of the church and for its work in the world. Ask the Lord to help you further its work without prejudice or favour

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Praise God for the wonders of the world and the beauty of His creation. As you do this, seek the Lord's wise counsel about how the Gospel may best be preached to all people, without favour or prejudice, according to God's will

Meditation

Let Christ inspire your attitude towards those you meet
Seek to be like Your Saviour, who loved everyone He met

Greet everyone you come across with an open heart
Give time to all, from little children, to adults

Listen carefully to what others may wish to say
Allow time to the elderly to address their concerns

Talk to young people because their opinion matters
Enjoy conversation with people from all backgrounds

Listen carefully to opinions with which you disagree
And make sure you understand the reasons for any rift

Look beyond appearances before making presumptions
Assume the best in people, and look for what is good

Seek to be known as one who cares, one who loves
Respond with generosity to every appeal for help

Be inspired by the Gospel stories of Jesus' generosity
And in so doing, let Christ speak to others, through you

Bible Study

Bible passage – Acts 3:17-26

¹⁷ 'Now, fellow believers, I know that you did this in ignorance, as did your leaders as well. ¹⁸ But God has already told us through the sayings of all the prophets that His Messiah would suffer, and He has made it come true! ¹⁹ So repent and change your ways, so that your sins may be wiped out, ²⁰ and times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and so that He may put Jesus in His place, the Messiah chosen for you, ²¹ for He must remain in heaven until the time when everything is restored, as God promised long ago through his holy prophets.

²² For Moses said,

"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to whatever he tells you, ²³ and anyone who does not listen to that prophet will be completely cut off from among his people."

²⁴ 'Indeed, all the prophets that have ever spoken, from Samuel on, have predicted these days. ²⁵ You are sons of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers; for He said to Abraham,

"All peoples on earth will be blessed through your offspring."

²⁶ It was for you, firstly, that God raised up His servant and sent Him to bless you, by turning each one of you from your wicked ways.'

Review

In the second half of his sermon, Peter explains clearly why God's people must repent if they are to be saved. The Messiah has come, as prophesied, and Peter urges his fellow Jews to receive Christ.

This is the second half of Peter's sermon to the crowd who gathered after the healing of the lame beggar (3:1-10). In the first half, he had declared forthrightly that the miracle of healing they had seen had not been done by himself or John; it was the blessing of God imparted through the name of Jesus (3:13), the man they had crucified in Jerusalem a few weeks earlier (3:13-16). So in our reading today, Peter speaks to this Jewish crowd, challenging them to receive their Messiah (3:18,20), and telling them they had to repent and change if they wanted to receive the 'refreshing' of God and His many blessings. He then backs this up with quotes from the Old Testament, boldly asserting that 'all' the Old Testament prophets *'have predicted these days'* (3:24). Then at the end, he calls on his fellow Jews, or *'sons of the prophets'*, to repent (3:26) and accept that Jesus is the one God has prepared throughout history to be the Messiah!

This was a tough message to put before the Jews! So at the beginning of this part of the sermon, Peter sounds a rather conciliatory note. Having accused the crowd of murdering their Messiah (3:14), he accepts that they might have done this unwittingly (3:17)! But everything Peter said to this crowd would stand or fall on whether he could prove it from Scripture, from the Old Testament. To the average Jew at the time, the prophets had foretold that the Messiah would come and save the Jews from their enemies. They backed this up with references to a number of prophets, significantly Zechariah (chapters 11 and 14), and Malachi (chapter 4); the Messiah was not someone who suffered, He was a victorious warrior! So when Jesus died on the Cross, most thought that this put paid to His claim to be the Messiah!

To challenge this prevailing view, Peter made a quite different claim. He said that the prophets all said that the Messiah would suffer (3:18f.). This, of course, is most expressively prophesied by Isaiah in his 'suffering servant' poems (Isaiah 42-53), and most famously in his description of the slaughtered lamb in chapter 53. Peter does not explain all this or refer to Isaiah, but he was broadly right, and theologians ever since have accepted this. The Old Testament is full of stories of God's will being forged through suffering or injustice; in the book of Job, for example, or the story of Israel's plight in Babylon. It is also there in the prophets Jonah and Joel, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and even Daniel. But instead of giving 'chapter and verse' of this claim, he tries to persuade his listeners that Jesus is the Messiah in a different way.

In verse 19, Peter changes tack completely and mixes up his message about the suffering of the Messiah with the original Gospel as preached by Jesus. Now when Jesus first preached at the beginning of His ministry, the Gospel writers all report Him as saying, *'repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand'* (Matthew

4:17, Mark 1:15 etc.). Notice then what Peter says here, which is, '*repent and change your ways, so that your sins may be wiped out*' (3:19), and then at the end of the sermon, '*turn each one of you from your wicked ways*' (3:26); these words echo those of Jesus. On the one hand, Peter may have simply been asking the Jews to change their minds and accept that Jesus was the Messiah, but the message is more radical than that. Peter tells the crowd that if they want to rediscover God's blessing (3:19), if they want to reconnect with the message of the prophets (3:18,21), if they want to be true sons of Abraham and bear God's covenant (3:24,25), then they must do what Jesus taught, and turn from sin (3:19,26).

There is no doubt that Peter did everything he could to persuade his hearers to accept Jesus as the Messiah. He quotes Moses as prophesying that '*a prophet like me*' will do God's will in the future (3:22,23 - Deuteronomy 18:15-19), a quote often used in his day to refer to the Messiah. He urges the crowd to think of what they have seen as part of God's blessing on His people, promised to Abraham and his descendants (3:25). But in much of what he says here, Peter does the work Jesus asked of him. In those precious days after the resurrection, not far distant in Peter's mind, Jesus had called on him to 'preach' the message of the Gospel they had learned from Him (Matthew 28:19,20). This is surely what the Holy Spirit was enabling Peter now to do.

It would be good if Acts 3 ended with Peter giving something like an altar call and advising those present about how to be a follower of Christ, but it does not. Peter certainly calls on all to repent (3:26), but we learn at the beginning of Acts 4 that the Temple authorities were none too pleased with what Peter was saying (4:1f.). As we will soon discover, his forthright preaching of the Gospel would soon get Peter into trouble.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
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Notes on the translation of the passage

V18 'But God has already told us through the sayings of all the prophets that His Messiah would suffer, and He has made it come true'

Other translations:

'But the things which God has announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled' (New American)

'In this way God fulfilled what He had foretold through all the prophets, that His Messiah would suffer' (NRVS)

The trouble with this verse is that almost every version I have found reads as if it is a difficult theological treatise! For this reason, I have sought to provide a translation befitting the circumstances and the more impromptu manner of speech of Peter. Frankly, the original text is not half as complicated as translators make it sound.

V19 'So repent and change your ways'

Other translations:

'Repent then and turn to God' (NIV)

'You must repent and turn to God' (New Jerusalem Bible)

The Greek text says 'repent and return', but it does not mention God's name; the Bible translators have placed it there to make the sentence more intelligible. I feel that the sense of the Greek is best retained by the translation 'repent and change your ways', which does not need the word 'God' to be attached for us to understand exactly what is meant.

V20 'that He may put Jesus in His place, the Messiah chosen for you'

Other translations:

'that He may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you, even Jesus' (NIV)

'that He may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus' (English Standard)

You might think, 'what is all the fuss about?' The Bible versions all say virtually the same thing, implying that Jesus is to be 'sent' again after the Jews have repented (verse 19). But what is this? Is it some new theology telling us that Jesus will come a second time for the Jews alone? No. The Greek word used here and translated 'sent' by all the Bible versions is a relatively rich Greek word meaning something like this, 'sent to fulfil a commission'. I believe that it bears the meaning 'put in

place', meaning not that Jesus comes again to be acclaimed by the Jews as their Messiah, but that Jesus may be rightfully acknowledged, or 'put in His place', as the Messiah of the Jews. My point may seem like splitting hairs, but think about this carefully. It is important that translation does not imply something at variance with the rest of Biblical revelation; nowhere else in the Bible is Jesus said to come a second time for the Jews alone, and we should not let an awkward translation appear to suggest this.

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Discipleship

Application

Using Scripture

The way Peter uses Scripture here hardly makes his case. He is arguing that although Jesus suffered on the Cross, He is the Messiah, but despite his quotes from Moses and Abraham, he does not quote a single prophet who says exactly this, and there are some! The quotes he gives encourage God's people to be obedient to Him, and most good Jews would have subscribed to that. Yet the Holy Spirit uses everything Peter says powerfully, and his sermon contains some real gems; the passage about 'times of refreshing' is something quite new in Scripture, and it is an inspiring way of talking about the days ahead in which God will bless His people.

So what does this teach us? The Holy Spirit is able to use us even though things are not expressed perfectly. Too many people who prepare for preaching do so as if only perfection will do, but the truth is that our best efforts will not achieve this standard. The task of the preacher as demonstrated by Peter here, is to be alive to the Holy Spirit so that God can use our efforts according to His plan and scheme of things. There is no question that anyone who preaches will give of their best and work to that aim, but the best preacher is not the one who thinks that perfection has been reached in delivering a sermon. The best preacher is one who is so open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit that Christ can break through our speaking and touch the heart of the listener.

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Questions for groups

1. What does this passage of Scripture tell us about Jesus? What kind of Messiah is needed today, and does Jesus fit the bill?
2. Discuss in your groups whether you think Peter makes a good case to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, here in this passage
3. When Peter asks people to repent, what do you think He is asking people to turn away from, and why? What does Christ offer those who turn away from sin?

Discipleship challenges

- *How do you go about trying to explain your faith to other people? Think about this, and set down on paper some of the arguments you might use. Read what you write down at a later date and you will find that you think about things differently, or may feel that something you wrote before can be better expressed. Change what you have written down accordingly.*

- *Pray in earnest for the church and for its witness to people in this day and age. Pray that the Holy Spirit will blow away the cobwebs of unhappiness and despair that have oppressed so many, and seek the liberation by which the true Gospel breaks out of the boundaries of religion.*
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Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, help us we pray, for when we seek to explain our faith to other, we often receive nothing but rejection from people who we hoped would know better. Give us the courage to keep loving our friends and neighbours, and never give up the witness You have placed within our hearts. AMEN
