

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Services on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2010

Acts 8:14-25 - "Unmasking the enemy"

2 years ago the Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards said how he doesn't like the Bible because it's boring. The veteran rock star revealed that he regularly reads the Bible to try to understand why people find it so "fascinating". He told one newspaper: "I read the Bible sometimes but it bores me to death. I just want to know what other people find so fascinating." Well pray that God would open Keith Richards' eyes, mind and heart to the truth of the Bible. One thing the Bible and perhaps the Acts of the Apostles in particular isn't - is boring. Luke's account of the spread of the gospel is a gripping, challenging and thrilling read. If you were with us last Sunday, we saw how the gospel went for the first time beyond Jerusalem into Samaria. Nick helpfully explained how Israel and Samaria had some serious "form" going back 1000 years – they loathed each other as heretics. As a Jewish Christian, Philip couldn't have chosen, humanly-speaking, a more hostile and unreceptive audience. He must have feared for his life as he went to preach the gospel in that Samaritan city. And yet God was at work as the gospel went out and v12 they believed and were baptised. And what encouragement and challenge there is for us in hearing that. Perhaps there's a friend or a family member who you've been praying for a long time and from time to time you think: "I can't honestly ever imagine HIM coming to Christ – just look at what he believes. Or just look at the way SHE behaves – I just can't contemplate such a thing." And yet God is able to convert even the most unlikely people. He did it to you if you're a believer! I was an unlikely convert when in early November 1996 I heard and believed the gospel. I had never once gone to the Christian Union at school and school chapel was something I tried my hardest to avoid – I can remember in my last year regularly getting a fellow prefect to tick my name off the attendance sheet so I could skip it. I doubt very much that there was anyone thinking – "Oh Tony Heywood – he's bound to become a Christian!" I was a long way from Christ and yet God graciously laid his hand upon me and brought me to Him. And He can do the same for our friends and colleagues and neighbours – even those who seem so anti or just plain apathetic.

The gospel knows no boundaries. Christ is for all – He's for those who like us, He's for those who are unlike us, He's for those who dislike us, He is for all. That's an encouragement for us and it's a challenge too if we think that the Christian message is only really for a certain type of person, people like us. They're the ones we pray for, they're the ones we seek to chat to about Christ – they're the ones we tend to invite to gospel outreach events. We forget that Christ is for all – those who are like us, those who are unlike us, those who dislike us. Helen and I have mentioned to a few people that as we begin to think and pray about where to go after Little Shelford, we'd love if possible to stay in the area. Now, there's nothing wrong with that and it may be right but we certainly need to check our motives we need to be prepared to go to a very different area, where there are fewer people like us, fewer good schools, a less comfortable and attractive place because Christ is for all people. For all of us as we think ahead to the October Week of Outreach, have we thought about inviting that neighbour from a completely different ethnic background, or from a completely different

social background - that guy in the lab, that woman from the golf club. Philip, praise God took the gospel to people who would naturally have hated him. Christ can triumph over any form of unbelief and that is a great encouragement to see as the gospel went to Samaria but we're going to see next 2 warnings because not everything is quite as rosy as it seems. The first warning is in v14-17 and the warning is this:

### **Authentic Faith must be Apostolic**

**V14 “When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon them; they had simply been baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands upon them, and they received the Holy Spirit.”**

They're puzzling verses that have caused a great deal of debate and indeed division over the years. It seems pretty clear that the Samaritans received the blessings of salvation in two distinct stages. So stage 1 – they believed and were baptised and I take it they then received forgiveness. Stage 2 Peter and John lay hands on them and they received the gift of the Spirit. And that two-stage initiation is the basis for the teaching of many Christians around the world. So for example Roman-Catholics teach a 2-stage initiation process. Stage 1 – baptism, normally as an infant. That is the moment in Roman-Catholic and Anglo-Catholic thinking – some Anglicans think the same way, when a person is born again. And then later in life comes confirmation when a Bishop as a successor, so it's understood of the apostles, lays hands on you and that is the moment you receive the Holy Spirit – 2-stages. This passage is also the basis of Pentecostal and some, but by no means all, Charismatic teaching of 2-stage blessing. It's slightly different from the Catholic view where the focus would be on the outward and the ceremonial. For the Pentecostal it's more inward and spiritual. Stage 1 – conversion – you repent and believe and you're forgiven, you're born again. Stage 2 – baptism of the Spirit as it's sometimes called or the 2<sup>nd</sup> blessing – that's the moment that you receive the Spirit. In seeking to evaluate these two view points, the key question to ask is this: “Is the 2-stage Samaritan experience to be regarded as the norm for Christian initiation and experience?” There's no denying that the Samaritan experience did, in fact take place in 2 stages but the question remains: “Is it God's normal purpose that the reception of the Spirit is a second experience subsequent to conversion and baptism?” And I want to argue that the 2-stage experience of the Samaritans is not normal but abnormal.

So as you read the NT you see again and again that initiation into Christ is a single, one-stage experience. People hear the gospel, they repent and believe and are baptised and they receive simultaneously both the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. So in Acts 2:38 preaching on the day of Pentecost Peter says: **“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.”** No indication that these gifts were divided at all. The apostle Paul agrees – speaking in 1 Corinthians 12:13 he writes: **“For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”** All of us baptised into the Spirit – it just assumes that this is something that all Christians enjoy. Or take Romans 8:9 where the apostle writes: **“And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”** So baptism of the Spirit is a universal Christian experience because you can't be a Christian without the Spirit. This is not to deny that many believers over the years have experienced post-

conversion a wonderful deeper, fuller, richer experience of God – I don't deny that at all. What is to be rejected is the insistence on a 2-stage initiation into Christ because as we read the New Testament we see that Acts 8:14-17 is exceptional and is not to be taken as the norm for us today, either in Catholic or Pentecostal terms.

Luke indicates that the delayed imparting of the Holy Spirit is unusual in v16 when he points out that: ***“the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them...”*** Contrary to expectation they had believed and been baptised with water but they had received the sign with out the thing it signified. So what's going on? Why this abnormal 2-stage initiation here?! We're not told explicitly but I want to suggest that it must be something to do with this unique and vital moment in salvation history and something to do with who the Samaritans were with their different beliefs –and the historical hostility between them and the Jews. There was a great danger that the old division between Jews and Samaritans would now be replicated between the followers of Christ. So, on one hand there's a danger that Jewish Christians might not accept the Samaritans as their brothers and sisters in Christ. And on the other hand there was the equal danger that the Samaritans might go off and form their own brand of Christianity as they had previously formed their own brand of Judaism.

So the first expansion of the gospel would have led to the first great division. That explains why Peter and John the spiritual heavy weights were sent in v14 - it explains why on this unique occasion the sending of the Spirit was delayed by God. That would have given the very clear message to the Jewish Christians that these Samaritan believers were real Christians – they were the real article on an equal standing with Jewish Christians and so they were to accept them as full members of the family of God – they were their brothers and sisters in Christ. It's a breathtaking moment! So a clear message to the Jewish Christians and a clear message to the Samaritan Christians. They had been used in their former beliefs to rejecting most of the Old Testament and the vital place of Jerusalem in the purposes of God. The Bible makes it clear in the prophets that the Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah and would become a great king in Jerusalem. It was in Jerusalem that Christ had established his kingdom through his death and resurrection. And it was from Jerusalem that the good news began to go out to the whole world.

It was key for the Samaritans to understand that there was no other Christianity than that formed in Jerusalem and on the words of the apostles and prophets. Those Samaritan believers, by accepting the ministry of the apostles from Jerusalem, had to acknowledge that, yes, they had been wrong – salvation does come from the Jews and from Jerusalem.

There's only one true and authentic form of Christianity and that is apostolic Christianity – Christianity that accepts the authority of the apostles' teaching. In the week of Outreach in October and on summer ventures this summer we're not free to decide what we'll preach – we must preach the apostolic faith.

Authentic faith must be apostolic and then secondly and lastly...

### **Authentic Faith must be Repentant**

V18-25. It is always thrilling to hear of people making a commitment to Christ and last week as we read v13 it was wonderful to hear of Simon the Sorcerer believing and being baptised. But authentic faith must be repentant. That is the lesson we learn from Simon. The focus returns to him in v18: ***“When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the***

**apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."** The faith he'd professed in v13 is now seen to be very shallow indeed. The old sorcerer bursts out of the new believer. He is still essentially pagan in his thinking. You see paganism is more concerned, more focused on power than a person. The great goal of paganism is to somehow access spiritual powers and forces and manipulate them for one's own benefit. And Simon still has that old mentality. He's excited by power not by the person of Christ. So when he sees the Holy Spirit coming on the Samaritans he doesn't say: "I want the Spirit!" he says: "I want the power!"

"I want the power to do the same please and I'll give you money if you'll give me the power." It's the mindset of paganism – paganism wants to receive spiritual gains by one's own means, for one's own ends. And Peter rebukes Simon in no uncertain terms, v20: **"May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."**

Simon hadn't yet repented of his paganism. It's a warning to us. We can easily drift into paganism when we become more focused on power than on Christ. We're pagan in our thinking whenever we think: "Oh I'll make sure God blesses me by doing more. If I do this and that then I'm bound to get that thing that I really want." We easily try to twist God's arm and get something out of Him by what we do. That's paganism.

Simon gave his name to a word called simony. It's the sin of buying ecclesiastical positions with money – so in the Middle Ages if you wanted to be a Bishop you could have a go at bribing the relevant patrons to get the job. That's simony and you'll be relieved to hear that I haven't been slipping any brown envelopes to anyone in an attempt to become the next Bishop of Ely! But we're guilty of simony whenever we seek spiritual power and authority to promote ourselves, whenever we engage in spiritual service because we want to be noticed. Or when we long to have certain spiritual gifts because they'll make us feel great and they'll impress others – or when I'm prepping my talk for camp and I suddenly find that I'm more concerned with what the other leaders will think of it and my reputation as a speaker rather than on what God thinks about it and how helpful it will be for the teenagers there - that's simony and we need to repent, it's paganism.

It's hard to tell whether Simon's repentance in v24 is genuine - Luke doesn't tell us but the warning for us is clear that our faith be a repentant faith rather than a faith that loves to cling on to the sins of our past – a faith that's happy to believe in Jesus but on our own terms – perhaps turning a blind eye to certain things Scripture teaches because we find them offensive or upsetting. So there's wonderful encouragement as the gospel reaches the Samaritans for the first time but there are warnings as well – faith must be apostolic and it must be repentant.

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)