

Sermon, 08 June 2025, Church of Scotland Geneva

Text 1: Jeremiah 22: 1-9 (taken from New International Version):

¹ This is what the Lord says: “Go down to the palace of the king of Judah and proclaim this message there:

² ‘Hear the word of the Lord to you, king of Judah, you who sit on David’s throne—you, your officials and your people who come through these gates.

³ This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

⁴ For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David’s throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people.

⁵ But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin.’”

⁶ For this is what the Lord says about the palace of the king of Judah:

“Though you are like Gilead to me,

like the summit of Lebanon,

I will surely make you like a wasteland,

like towns not inhabited.

⁷ I will send destroyers against you,

each man with his weapons,

and they will cut up your fine cedar beams

and throw them into the fire.

⁸ “People from many nations will pass by this city and will ask one another, ‘Why has the Lord done such a thing to this great city?’

⁹ And the answer will be: ‘Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord their God and have worshiped and served other gods.’”

Text 2: Acts 2: 1-21 (taken from New International Version):

¹ When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.

⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.

⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans?”

⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?

⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,

¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome

¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.

¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning!

¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ “‘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.

¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,

and they will prophesy.

¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heavens above

and signs on the earth below,

blood and fire and billows of smoke.

²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness

and the moon to blood

before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

²¹ And everyone who calls

on the name of the Lord will be saved.

What is the real value of the spoken word ? It's a tough question to answer and that's especially off-putting if you're entrusted with writing and preaching a sermon, I can assure you.

The Bible itself is somewhat ambiguous on the issue. On the one hand, words are seen as incredibly powerful and either a force for good or a force for evil. As John tells us from the start of his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

Immediately after, he recounts how John the Baptist was sent ahead of Jesus to preach as a witness to this Word of God. There is no doubting the value and power of God's Word.

Yet elsewhere, what is said is held almost in contempt. For fairly obvious reasons, the fine words of Israel's leaders, both kings and religious authorities, are dismissed by both prophets and Jesus Himself, because what they say does not match their unjust actions. Words are meaningless in the context of hypocrisy.

But there's a subtle nuance here. In the passage we heard from Jeremiah today, the prophet condemns the injustice of Jehoiakim, who ruled as king of Judah from 609 to 597 BC. Unlike his father Josiah, Jehoiakim took the kingship of Judah as a chance to get rich quick at the expense of his people, many of whom were basically coerced into slave labour. Yet while Jeremiah condemns such practices, his advice to Jehoiakim is not so much to stop building up the kingship of Judah, but to act positively to build it on something better.

Through Jeremiah, God tells Jehoiakim, "this is what the Lord says about the palace of the king of Judah: "(Though) you are like Gilead to me, like the summit of Lebanon." At the same time, His instructions are very clear: "Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place."

What God is effectively saying is that He has no problem with the concept of Jehoiakim's kingship. Gilead and the summit of Lebanon were seen as the pinnacle of beauty and majesty by many. However, their worth is nothing if they are not underpinned by actions which make a difference. It is not a question of having one or the other. It is a question of making them work by taking seriously what God has told His people.

That is the real value of what was seen – or more appropriately heard – at Pentecost. The Disciples were meeting quietly, keeping a low profile as Jesus had instructed them, until the Holy Spirit came upon them. All of a sudden, this happened in no uncertain fashion as a powerful wind came into the house where they were gathered and what looked like tongues of fire touched each of them. They were empowered to go outside and preach Jesus' message in a variety of languages.

These words touched Jews who were in Jerusalem for the festival of Firstfruits, which took place at the beginning of the wheat harvest, some fifty days after Passover. By giving them these linguistic abilities, the Holy Spirit had enabled the Disciples to reach to a vast crowd of potential believers from all over what was then the Roman Empire.

But the words themselves were not going to achieve a great deal. Many of those who heard them were amazed but they started to ask each other, "What does this mean?" Others even laughed it off, dismissing the Disciples as being no more than drunk.

Peter responded to this immediately. He spoke up and declared Jesus' message straightaway, starting by explaining how this was God's prophecy come true. And this was not just in terms of what was said but in quite powerful terms: the gift of the Spirit, blood, fire and billows of smoke, the sun turned to darkness and the moon to blood. The text goes on beyond this to set out how it was not just wonders around them which people would see, but a real transformation in what they would be able to do.

Speaking in multiple tongues would have been a nice trick. The Disciples were preaching the word of Jesus, which was hardly unimportant. Yet none of this would have had a great deal of significance if there had never been any intent to do something, to make a change.

There is probably nobody who hasn't been to Church more than a few times who hasn't heard something about the dangers of hypocrisy. The Church of Scotland, with its staunch, Presbyterian traditions, has long been highly allergic to the concept of "High Church", seeing things such as fine art, stained-glass windows, theological robes, fine music and many more, as distractions from the word of God. Certainly, in its history, the Church has seen quite a few, less than fortunate instances, where the finery of religion has become a distraction from the discovery of faith. Even worse, it has seen a powerful Church become a goal in and of itself, even failing to speak up for the victims of injustice, as Jeremiah calls for Judah's rulers to do.

But does that mean that whatever defines our religion is somehow wrong ? When others see our buildings, admire our stained-glass windows or hear our music, are they seeing nothing but emptiness in what we are communicating ?

The answer is yes, if our message as Christians is to ensure that we say and project the supposedly right thing for its own sake. But the answer is no, when that message is based on action, impact, results.

Worshipping God is next to worthless if it is done by rote and affects nobody. But when it draws people in, when they approach, encounter and respond to God, then they are gaining what Jesus died to give us. It matters incredibly. In fact, the act of worship is not the true worship at all. It is what it makes possible. But that doesn't reduce its value.

The Disciples already knew Jesus' message before Pentecost. He had explained it to them, before and after His resurrection. But He had told them to stay quiet until they received the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. That gift gave a purpose to the message and the words which they spoke.

So what is our purpose ? When we pray, when we worship, when we do something as the Church, do we ask ourselves what impact we expect to have ? Do we try to do "Christian" things – give to a beggar, say a kind word – because we feel that we need to be seen to do so, or because we are aiming to make a change ? We don't have to be saving the world. But if we show sympathy because we're trying to make a small difference to someone, if we tell people about our faith because we want them to reflect genuinely themselves, and so much more, then what we communicate has a real and crucial value.

Here's a question. When the Disciples first started to address the crowd at Pentecost, those listening either failed to understand what their message meant or else thought they were drunk. I think we've all walked down a street and heard someone trying to preach or sell a supposedly religious message enough times. Isn't the typical reaction of most simply to shrug it off and hope to get away before getting cornered by this slightly deranged character, especially if they're smelling of drink ? If so, what made the Disciples so different that their words became the basis of the Christian Church, in which we are still worshipping today ?

Probably, this is because the Church of God has a purpose – to make God's Kingdom come, His will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. It is not there to promote itself in isolation or to form an alternative to the world around it. It is there to engage that world and, as Jeremiah called for, to have it based on God's mercy and justice, not on greed and injustice. The Disciples called for a change and for action which would make the necessary difference. That gave their words the real meaning which so many other words lack completely.

God's Church has to communicate effectively and it often struggles to do so. Whatever the challenge though, we have to start with the question of how does it have an impact on the world around us ? How does it make a world of problems into God's world ? We won't do so by ignoring the rest of that world while we preach God's word in isolation. We will do so when we know what effect spreading God's word will have because we want it to do so.