

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.' Acts 8.18-19.

We've been working our way through *Acts* these past weeks. Last Sunday we saw how what looked like a disaster turned out to be a blessing. The stoning to death of Stephen, the first person to be killed for his faith, led to a general persecution of the early church in Jerusalem. They were forced to flee for their lives. But if one door was being slammed shut in their faces, another was opening. The persecution of Christians in Jerusalem actually served to shock them out of their comfort zone, because now that they were scattered in the surrounding area, Christianity was being preached in Judæa and Samaria. Far from putting *down* Christians, the persecutors were spreading them! Doesn't God move in mysterious ways?

Well *now we meet a new character called Philip*, who was appointed one of the 7 deacons with Stephen. He is the one preaching in Samaria. I would like you to notice what it is he is preaching. He isn't preaching politics, do-goodery or social involvement but Jesus Christ, vv4-5 on p1101... So much of today's preaching from our pulpits is modish progressivism or social justice with a dog collar on, but you will hardly hear the name of Jesus. I honestly believe our churches in GB are declining because they have taken their eye off the ball. Preachers have grown embarrassed about naming the name of Jesus. They have lost their focus. To put it crudely, *he is our unique selling point*. Certainly Philip realised this, and many were converted as a result, v12... And yes, many were *baptised*, just as we are doing this morning.

I'd like to notice also that all this was happening in *Samaria*. Today *Samaria* is known as the West Bank, and tragically there is real hatred between the Palestinians of the West Bank and the Israelis. Well, it was not so different 2,000 years ago. Samaritans and Jews loathed and despised each other. So the fact that the Christian message was being preached by Jews from Jerusalem in darkest *Samaria* is a minor miracle. You can see here Christianity breaking out of its exclusive Jewish mould. Soon it will become a worldwide religion, tied to no one country, and transcending all barriers of nation, race, and class.

You often hear Muslims talking about Christianity as the 'western' religion, the Christian 'crusaders' from the west who are coming to oppress the east. This is complete tripe. Jesus was not a westerner. He was from the Near *East*. Christianity is now a worldwide religion which is actually *dying* in the materialist, consumerist west, and flourishing in Africa and China. Christ is for *everyone*, even for the Jews' ancient enemies, the Samaritans.

As Philip was preaching Christ to the Samaritans, we come across a strange character known as Simon Magus, or Simon the Magician. People have spiritual needs as well as bodily, emotional needs. We like to think we are all scientific and rational these days, but just go to WH Smiths to see rows and rows of magazines all about the occult, psychics, crystals, New Age, Feng Shuei. There's a real spiritual hunger out there in our materialist society, just as there was 2,000 years ago when Simon Magus was peddling his quackery, vv9-11... He

satisfied some of their deep longings for a while, but when Philip came along with Jesus, they knew they had found the real thing. Even Simon was converted, vv12-13... Certainly today's churches recognise the spiritual hunger of our people, but we seem somehow to have lost our nerve. We don't seem to have the courage to say to people, 'Look, here's Jesus. *He's* the one you're looking for'. I'm not sure that we really believe that Jesus is the only one who can satisfy the deepest cravings of the soul. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman:

Everyone who drinks this water [from this well] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water *I* give him will never thirst. Indeed the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life (*John* 4.13).

Our churches will never start to grow until we begin to regain confidence in our product, and our product is a person, and he has a name, and it's Jesus Christ. We need to follow Philip's example. He saw the deep need of the Samaritans, and he had the confidence to give them the real thing, Jesus, v12...

And amazing things happened. The few apostles remaining in Jerusalem came, and prayed for the Spirit to come upon them, vv14-16... And it happened, a second Pentecost, a *Samaritan* Pentecost. Who would have thought it possible, v17...?

But then something very odd happened. True, Simon Magus had become a Christian, but he had not lost his old ways. He was so impressed with the powerful workings of the Holy Spirit that *he* wanted to be able to perform these 'magic' tricks. So he offered to *buy* this gift, vv18-19... And from Simon's attempt at *buying* the gifts of the Holy Spirit comes the ancient sin known to history as *simony*. Simony was the sin of *buying* bishoprics, deaneries and rich rectories.

But Simon is a warning to all of us to practise what we preach as Christians. Simon had gone through the outward rituals of conversion and baptism, but his heart was still very *unconverted*. He still loved money, and thought that money could buy anything, even the free gifts of God.

We have all come across those people who are sickeningly pious. They make a great play of saying their prayers, and reading their Bibles, and coming to Church, but they will screw you in business, or ignore you in your time of need. We all know hypocrites like that whose Christianity is only from the teeth outwards, but whose hearts are unchanged.

Because that's what Christianity is all about. It's about Christ coming into your life, and changing everything about you. The word for that is *repentance*. It's more than just being sorry; it's about *repointing* your whole life, so that your values, all your priorities are completely changed. A changed person, a truly converted person, has Christ at the centre of his life, and no longer self. Christ rules every part of you - the way you think, your priorities, the way you spend your money, the way you treat others. When Simon offered to buy the Spirit, he shewed there was no change in his life.

The world will never listen to us Christians if we are no different from the world. That great evangelist, John Stott, now 87, said something utterly shocking at his farewell at Keswick in July, 2007. He quoted the Revd Iskander Jaheed, a Muslim who converted to Christianity. He said, 'If all Christians were Christian - that is, Christ-like - there would be no more Islam today'. Shocking, isn't it, but true!