

[More Than Words...](#)

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read Acts 2:14-41



Our reading from Acts retells the first appearance of the disciples at Pentecost, newly aflame with the power and authority of the Holy Spirit. I write this at a time when the world also feels like it is on fire.

We live in a time of anger and despair. We are angry at this virus that has caused so much disruption to lives and livelihoods. We despair because people have had to make sacrifices, choices that they would not normally make, that have caused pain, grief and hurt. We have also seen a different kind of anger.

Whether one person's actions during the height of lockdown was judged to be acceptable or contemptible has filled many hours of television, radio and print coverage. Social media and conversations have covered the ins and outs of the Government's Chief Adviser's decision to take his family to a place of sanctuary some 200+ miles from their home. Conspiracy theories, distorted facts and illogical arguments find as many followers as those seeking to distil the truth from the murk. One man's acceptable exception is another's sackable offence. Strangely, it seems less a matter of truth but opinion, of loyalty over law. And emotions run high.

Across the Atlantic, America is gripped not just in the crisis of COVID-19, but in the latest tragic chapter in its long history of racial tension and injustice. On Monday evening, the President stood outside the

damaged church that has been central to so much of America's Christian heritage and announced his intention to send in troops to quell the rioters. There is an irony that in order to stage this announcement, the police had to violently disperse a number of peaceful protesters who had justifiable and legal right to be exactly where they were, doing exactly what they were doing.

This is not the time or place to discuss the complexity of the history of America's race relations. I don't know enough to speak with authority, so I won't even attempt it. However, I do know that there is something rotten in America, a racist seam which we also find in our country as much as we might want to deny it. I recognise that when people use labels to diminish or belittle people, we have a problem that finds echoes across the world. I know that this sense of injustice and powerlessness goes far beyond one man's unlawful killing, tragically wasteful as that event was. From my time in Nigeria, I also know what it is like to live under a military dictatorship, with a dusk-to-dawn shoot-on-sight curfew, which is where it feels like America is at risk of heading. And emotions are running high.

The disciples were on fire with zeal for the gospel, the opportunity to share the good news of Christ's sacrifice that offers reconciliation between humanity and their heavenly creator. Their message of hope is still strident today. A quick analysis of Peter's sermon may help shed light on today.

Peter's audience heard that they were guilty of Jesus' death, not because they had played a direct role in his betrayal, condemnation and execution, but because of their very identity as part of a regime that could sanction this. Though living under Roman rule, it was the Jewish religious leaders who had put Jesus to death; Pilate as the voice of Rome famously washed his hands of the whole sorry affair. As Jewish people, the crowd on Pentecost had to bear the responsibility for their leaders' decision. Some of them may have been in the area at the time, some may even have petitioned for Barabbas' release and condemned Jesus to die, but all were guilty as charged. And emotions ran high.

But the story didn't end there. Peter gives hope to the crowd; Jesus' death wasn't just their burden of guilt, it was also their salvation. Jesus died so that their sin could be forgiven, the sins of complacency, culpability, and silence as much as the sins of those who had actually been baying for Jesus' blood.

Today's scenes in Britain and America remind me of that crowd. It leads me to say, echoing the words of Jesus on the cross, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." I fear that some have an intent beyond their actions and words, but I still pray "Father, forgive." I fear that there are some who will use any excuse to break rules, flout restrictions and follow the path of wanton destruction. I still pray, "Father, forgive." I fear that there are some who will remain dissatisfied whatever happens. I still pray, "Father, forgive."

But then, I need to understand my role as a fellow member of that crowd. I'm not Peter, I'm one of the onlookers. I'm guilty not of crucifying Christ, but of staying silent while others have died because of the colour of their skin. I'm guilty of the shared sin of being a member of the human race, just like all those who have broken lockdown restrictions, whatever their reasons.

I worry that this is making me more bitter and jaded in my view of humanity and the world. I feel more deflated when I read of thousands heading to the beaches, like I do when I see people declaring their wish to arm themselves if only our country's laws would allow it. Father, forgive me for my attitude, my lack of faith in humanity, and continue to direct me towards Christ, who remains the hope for the world today.

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