This is a joyful Sunday on which we celebrate two important events linked to our Reading.

In the Church’s calendar it is the first Sunday after Easter.

For HTB Churches it is Alpha Sunday.

The combination of these dates may perhaps explain why I have been invited to preach here in St Jude’s today.

Back in the mists of time when I was a choirboy, the first Sunday after Easter was unofficially called *Get Away Sunday* by Church of England Clergy because it was known then and now to be the time

when many vicars, rectors and curates, exhausted by their exertions during Lent Holy Week and Easter, get away to the hills or ski slopes – leaving their pulpits to stand— ins.

Another date related reason for my being a stand in is that today also happens to be Alpha Sunday.

Like many of you, I am a most grateful beneficiary of the Alpha Course. I first did it at HTB 17 years ago.

At that time I think I might have won a sort of booby prize for being the most reluctant Alpha course goer ever.

So reluctant that the former churchwarden of HTB my friend Michael Alison had to physically escort me into the church.

I remember saying to him as we walked towards HTB “This isn’t for me. I don’t like the idea of Happy Clappies twanging electric guitars. I don’t like the idea of Cheesy Christians sharing in Groups”.

But Michael escorted me firmly on, and at the end of my Alpha Course first session my predominant emotion was one of relief.

Nobody happied or clappied at me and I found that our group was full of congenial and delightful people, but even so I said to myself Alpha is not really for me. I don’t think I’ll come back next Thursday if I’ve got a better invitation.

However, it was a time in my life when I wasn’t getting any invitations.

I was at a low point going through what I have sometimes called the experiences of defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy and jail. I was something of a pariah to the press and to the public. So next Thursday with no alternative invitations I went back to HTB for the next session of the course and then I went again and again.

But then there was talk of a Holy Spirit weekend which made me nervous.

If I belonged to anything at all in those days I was a member of the Church Reticent wing of Anglicanism. I was not at all sure that there was such a thing or person as The Holy Spirit and I was completely sceptical of the notion that this Holy Spirit could possibly be called down by my friend and lawyer Bruce Streather to appear in the unlikely surroundings of The Chatsworth Hotel in Worthing – which is where the modest sized Alpha Course de— camped in 1997 for the Holy Spirit weekend.

But as many of you know, when the Holy Spirit moves, he moves in a mysterious way and with extraordinary transformational effects.

Certainly he completely changed the direction of my life that day in Worthing.

The relevance of mentioning it this morning is that it was a day, like all Holy Spirit days, which in a supernatural way was linked to the momentous historical and spiritual event described in our Reading.

For what our Reading is all about is the first manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit to ordinary people, after Jesus’s Resurrection.

We need to set the scene here.

In the days immediately after the First Easter the early followers of Jesus were much more fearful than joyful.

Most of them simply could not grasp the meaning of the Resurrection. Some disciples failed to recognise the risen Christ. Others locked themselves into an upper room full of fear and doubt.

So if the 12 were slow to get the message of the First Easter, how much slower and more doubtful were the ordinary men and women in the street in 1st Century Jerusalem – until the great scene and the great speech described in our Reading.

The vivid pen of Luke, the author of Acts portrays the scene in what Hollywood used to call glorious technicolour.

There is a sound like the blowing of a violent wind from Heaven.

There are tongues of fire.

And there is the miracle of the disciples filled with the Holy Spirit.

They begin speaking individually to each hearer in the multi— national multi-lingual crowd in their own language.

However the reactions of the hearers are mixed. It is a scene in which the heavenly power of the Holy Spirit collides with earthly bewilderment; amazement; perplexity; chaos and even comedy.

“They have had too much wine!” say the mockers.

Now this is the point where the voice of clarity and authority is needed to explain what is going on.

And that voice comes from Peter in one of the most remarkable speeches recorded in the New Testament. It is this speech on which I invite you to reflect today.

If anyone was to suggest an alternative title for the Book of Acts a good suggestion might be ‘The Book of Speeches’.

Over a quarter of the book consists of Luke recapturing early Christian speeches from Saints such as Stephen, Paul and Peter.

Now speeches fascinate me. Perhaps this is because I had the good fortune (or misfortune) to sit the House of Commons for nearly a quarter of a century where I listened in the age of late night and all night sittings to shed loads of speeches which ranged from the mediocre to the mundane and just occasionally to the magnificent.

During that era it was widely agreed that there were three Parliamentary orators in a class by themselves.

In alphabetical order they were Tony Benn, Michael Foot, Enoch Powell.

I call them orators because of the sheer raw power of their natural speaking ability, so strong, so extempore, that golden phrases seemed to flow from their lips as gifts from some mysterious force within.

Now an even higher oratorical force breathes through the sentences of Peter’s speech to the crowd in Jerusalem.

He and his phrases were filled with the Holy Spirit so no wonder this is such a powerful speech expounding as it does the mission of Jesus, the meaning of the resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit.

“Men of Israel — Listen to this:” he begins in Verse 22 raising his voice.

Note that this was no mealy— mouthed English golf club speech opening of the “the unaccustomed as I am to public speaking” variety. Although incidentally this was true in Peter’s case for he was an uneducated fisherman unused to speech making.

Peter begins boldly ­­— as good orators do by telling us in ringing terms exactly what his speech is going to be about.

“Jesus of Nazareth” are his arresting opening words “a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs”. This is the headline. It’s all about Jesus.

Then Peter again like many an orator gives the opposition a brief but brutal rubbishing.

“And you, with the help of wicked men put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (V33) he thunders. Perhaps we can imagine him pointing his finger at some of the guilty cheerleaders for the crucifixion now squirming in the crowd.

But with or without that touch of imagination we can see from his words alone that Peter was pulling no punches. He was making no compromises with the wicked men “and you”, he tells his hearers, opening their eyes to their complicity in the sins that had taken Jesus to the Cross.

In Evangelical and Reformed Theology it is thought vitally important to emphasise in a Sermon what is called *‘The Conviction of Sin’.*

The great Welsh preacher, Martin Lloyd Jones who was the Minister at Westminster Chapel for nearly 40 years once said

“Any Sermon which fails to emphasis the conviction of sin lacks seriousness on the part of the preacher and his hearers”.

Peter is deadly serious as he convicts his hearers of their sins for which Jesus died.

And then he goes on to convince them of the great truth saying something utterly extraordinary about Jesus (V24):

“God raised him from the dead. Freeing him from the agony of death because it was impossible for death to keep his hold on him”.

Now of course we know some 2,000 years later that Peter is proclaiming Jesus’s resurrection.

But to the crowd in Jerusalem this must have sounded incredible.

Yet instead of explaining why it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Jesus, Peter deploys another familiar weapon from the arsenal of Oratory. He fires a killer quotation.

Public speakers love using quotations.

Going back for a moment the three Parliamentarians that I mentioned, Tony Benn often reinforced his questionable proletarian roots by quoting Keir Hardie.

No Michael Foot speech was complete without a line or two from his hero Nye Bevan.

And Enoch Powell, the Professor of Greek, regularly cited Sophocles or some other ancient sage to buttress his argument.

But what all of them were doing, and what Peter now does in his Jerusalem Speech is to send in the cavalry of quotation to win his argument.

The quotation Peter uses is from the book of Psalms – the prayer book of Jesus which most of the Jews in the crowd would have been familiar with.

Now I love the psalms. During the 7 months I spent in prison appreciating the gift of so much unusual free time to read, to think and to pray I immersed myself in the psalms.

And when I came out of prison I served a longer two year sentence in the one British Institution which had worse food and worse plumbing than a prison, Wycliffe Hall Oxford – which I loved because I was so well taught by Graham and other tutors and also because I was able to make the Book of Psalms my special subject.

Because of those studies at Wycliffe I understand exactly why Peter’s citation of Psalm 16 in V25 to 29 in our reading, perhaps obscure to us, was was such a killer quotation to the crowd in Jerusalem.

First Century Jews regarded the Psalms as the highest source of Scriptural authority.

And they often scoured the Psalms for clues as to when and how their long awaited Messiah would be coming.

So Peter socks it to his audience by waking them up to the Messianic prophecy contained in Psalm 16.

After quoting the key verses from it Peter explains that the author of the Psalm King David, the great leader and prophet of Israel is here prophesying that Jesus Christ will rise from the dead. It’s a prophesy made a thousand years earlier, which has now been fulfilled.

Ramming the point home, Peter moves to his peroration (V31—32).

“Seeing what was ahead he spoke of the resurrection of Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life and we are all witnesses of the fact”.

The witnesses in the crowd that day must have been stunned. Many of them heard rumours of the risen Christ. Some of them had seen him. All of them were now being swept along by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now they learned that the extraordinary event of the Messiah’s resurrection had been prophesised by their founding father King David in Scripture.

And again to ram his point home, Peter ends this part of his speech, with powerful theological explanation for what has happened, by telling them what the risen Christ is doing now.

What Peter says (V33):

“Exalted to the right hand of God he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.”

What Peter is proclaiming is the exaltation of Jesus. The sovereignty of Jesus over death and his sovereignty as the source and pourer out of The Holy Spirit.

One of the strangest features of this speech is the crowd’s reaction to what they saw and heard.

You might have thought that they would applaud or cheer the amazing good news or Jesus’s resurrection.

But instead to use an appropriate word they were petrified. Luke tells us in a later verse in Acts 2 “When the people heard this they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles:

“What shall we do?”

This was an authentic reaction.

The conviction of sin had gone deep, but so also had Peter’s convincing of the crowd of the sovereignty of The Risen Christ. We know from later passages in Acts that many in the crowd answered the question: “What shall we do?” by repenting and being baptised.

Perhaps it is appropriate to put this same question to ourselves as we come to the end of our reflection on this reading.

With much more understanding than the crowd in Jerusalem, we the crowd in St Jude’s have celebrated Easter.

Many of us have felt the power of the Holy Spirit, who we honour with special gratitude on this Alpha Sunday.

But what shall we do – now in the present reality of our lives if we are convinced the astonishing truths proclaimed in Peter’s speech?

I don’t know about you but I sometimes find in my own spiritual journey a tension between being a born again Christian and a failed again Christian.

There can be highs at Easter or Christmas or perhaps when teaching the Alpha Course in prison or on a Holy Spirit weekend.

But there are also lows when we stumble and fall.

But I draw encouragement especially in the low moments by thinking not just about the speech of Peter but also about the character of Peter.

He was Jesus’s most fervent disciple but also his most flawed disciple. Only a few days before he gave his speech, Peter had committed the terrible sin on the eve of the Crucifixion of denying Jesus three times.

And afterwards, the Gospel tells us that “he went out and wept bitterly”.

So Peter knew the pain of being a failed again Christian. He understood the conviction of sin.

Yet what transformed Peter into being the rock on which Christ built his church was the strength of his relationship with Jesus.

And that’s why Peter’s speech in Jerusalem was all about Jesus.

It’s why he knew that forgiveness and grace comes from Jesus.

It’s why he said that the Holy Spirit is poured out by Jesus.

And it is why the answer to the question “What shall we do?” is surely this:

Like Peter we should concentrate in prayer and obedience on our relationship with Jesus.

For it is He who will grant us the true peace,

the true forgiveness, the true grace

and the true glory of knowing him as our Risen Lord and Saviour.

Amen