

Sermon Feast of Pentecost Year A 2020

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the feast of Pentecost is a pivotal turning point in the narrative presented by Luke. Luke - author of the gospel that bears his name and of the Acts of the Apostles - constructs the story we recall today as the hinge on which his two volumes hang. Much of the Gospel of Luke is shaped around Jesus 'resolutely setting his face for Jerusalem'. It is in Jerusalem where the climax of Jesus' life and ministry unfolds. And on the night of the resurrection the two disciples on the way to Emmaus run *back* to Jerusalem after encountering the risen Lord. That very night Jesus reappears and eats and speaks with the gathered disciples. He tells them that *'repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name, beginning from Jerusalem'*. They are to stay *there* until they *'are clothed with power from on high.'*

That moment of empowerment occurs, of course, in what we celebrate today. The Spirit of God descends as wind and fire and 'clothes' the disciples with power. And the disciples themselves experience this moment as a turning point. No longer that unsure, fearful, timid group. In the light of this experience they become courageous agents of the gospel. From Jerusalem they will carry the Gospel to ends of the earth. And so, Jerusalem, then, becomes the springboard - the launching pad - for the church's apostolic mission. And this bringing out - this carrying forth of the gospel - is how the rest of the Book of Acts unfolds. Paul's journey to Rome, which the later chapters of Acts recounts, symbolises this universal reach of the Gospel. So, the gospel leads us *to* Jerusalem. Then, in the power of the Spirit, it is *from* Jerusalem the good news is proclaimed to *all* peoples.

The universal reach of the church's mission is, however, already anticipated in the second chapter of Acts, our first reading today. This is the day when church readers draw short lots to see who will land this lesson! *'Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia. Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, visitors, from Rome, Jew and proselyte.'* This is an odd and eccentric list. And most likely relies on a memory which predates Luke's account. But these diverse peoples and nations are mentioned simply to highlight how people from all over the known world were present. At the birth of the church we see that the scope and mission of the church will know no bounds.

But the important note here is that disciples were *understood*. The representatives from all these peoples and nations hear the good news proclaimed *in their own tongue*. Here, then, we see what thinkers on this point have long understood: that at Pentecost the curse of Babel is finally reversed. At Pentecost the confusion and scattering which was the result of Babel no longer determines either our relationship with God or each other. Man had lost contact with God. But in power of Pentecost God can once more be understood; he is accessible; he can be known.

Now, the church fathers delighted in drawing out the parallels between the old covenant and the new. They loved to highlight how what was lost in the earlier was regained in the latter. St Paul himself recognised this by identifying Jesus as the Second Adam: what was lost by the first Adam, regained by the Second. Later, the fathers identified how the Tree of Calvary reversed the tree of Eden; what was lost in the garden of Paradise was regained in garden of the tomb. At Pentecost, the barriers of language and culture are overcome. The Spirit brings harmony and understanding. The diverse peoples of the world can once more be united. Babel is reversed!

So, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is more than just a moment of empowerment for ministry. It is more than just a moment when a group of anxious disciples were transformed into agents for mission. It is more, even, than a moment of experiencing God in a new way. No. This is a moment in which God's original design for humankind is restored. For Luke, Pentecost is a birth, a new beginning, a sign of the *re-creation* worked by God in Jesus Christ. In Luke's mind this is the birth of the church. He places this story at the start of his account in Acts most certainly to echo the birth of Jesus at the start of the Gospel. And this to stress that the church *continues* Jesus's saving work. Both the birth of Jesus and the birth of church relate the presence of the Holy Spirit in a particular way. And in both the presence of Mary is clearly identified.

The Spirit, then, works to bring to birth, to create. *Come, Creator Spirit, come* the ancient hymn addressed to the Holy Spirit says. And the Spirit's work as the agent in re-creation we see so clearly in the reversing of Babel. At Babel, the one people and one tongue resulted in scattering and division and multiplicity of language. At Pentecost, the many peoples and many tongues are brought to a unity of understanding. The spirit's work of re-creation, of restoring what was lost, leads us to a critical truth: it is the Spirit's work to bring understanding.

Within Trinitarian faith we say that the Persons of the Trinity share the same essence and are One in substance. But there is within this perfect Union works *particular* to each Person. And among the particular works of the Spirit is the work of leading to wisdom, to insight, to understanding. It is the Spirit who leads us truth. Indeed, our Lord himself when addressing the disciples in John 16 says as much. The promised Spirit of truth - the paraclete, the advocate - *will guide you into all truth*.

With the Spirit's particular work to bring insight and understanding, to lead us to wisdom and truth, it is right that we recognise the church shares in this work. The church's mission is one of a journey toward clarity. The story of the councils and of the creeds is this story: of bringing forth clarity, of illuminating the light of truth. However, in the church for many decades now it has become fashionable, indeed even expected, that all articles of faith be challenged, interrogated, questioned, undermined, even done away with. A virtue has been made of disruption and indeed of confusion. We must say this this is a sin against the Spirit of Pentecost.

Now, this is not an argument for blind faith or superstition. Our faith is more than able to withstand attack! But the consistent witness of the scriptures, and of apostolic faith rests on the simple assertion that *God desires to be known and understood*. God desires clarity! The record of God's revelation to humankind - to which the bible gives account - is precisely this: that God makes himself known. God's long dealing with humankind is not to obscure himself or to hide himself. The record of scripture is not one of God seeking to confuse us or to confound us. No! The exact reverse is true! God's revelation to humankind is of the gradual unveiling of the truth leading most perfectly to the revelation in Jesus Christ. Christian faith at its most basic is the humble acceptance of what has been revealed and faithfully handed on.

Those agents which seek disruption and confusion, which delight in doubt and division, and which seek to dismantle creedal and apostolic faith, and which finally can only assert a truth for one, must be resisted. It is not an authentic expression of the faith of Pentecost. It can ultimately only lead us back to Babel. Chaos, confusion, incomprehension are not marks of the Spirit. *Come creator spirit come*. Perhaps that can be our prayer at this time. It is not always easy to accept the truth proposed by Christ. But pray in humility for the gift of faith. Do not be reluctant to pray for understanding. Pray for the Spirit to lead us to truth. Because it is possible. Because it is promised. And this is what God desires for us. Amen.