

Scripture Reading for Pentecost

Acts 2:1-8,12-21

2 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?

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 Does This Mean”?

Luke relates special moments when “heaven” and earth meet in very dramatic and intense ways. Recall the angel’s visitation to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, and later to Mary the mother of Jesus.¹ When Jesus was baptized, we are told the heavens “were opened” and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove and a voice from heaven said, “You are, my dear son; with you I am well pleased.”² Later, we have that extra-special moment of Christ’s Transfiguration on the mountain witnessed by Peter, James, and John.³ We have the two angelic men addressing the women at the tomb saying, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has been raised!”⁴ In Acts 1, Luke relates the Ascension where Jesus is mysteriously taken *into heaven*.⁵ And now in Acts 2 we read of, “A sound like a violent wind blowing came *from heaven* and filled the entire house where Christ’s followers were sitting.”⁶ What does this mean?⁷ For a start, it means something very special is going on, not least because the Spirit coming *from* heaven is the complement of Jesus going *to* heaven. But what happened at Pentecost was in a long line of divine encounters, and it affects us too here today.

In Genesis 1 we are told that the spirit of God was brooding over the face of the emerging cosmos. That same creative spirit - the strong Hebrew word denotes “breath” or “wind” - not only breathed life into Adam, but progressively began to make Godself known to human beings.⁸ The spirit of God was thought to be present in particular people in Old Testament times, such as prophets or kings. But that presence was not continual and could be withdrawn if the people involved disobeyed God. By the end of the Old Testament, after the last of the prophets, the divine Spirit was not in evidence in Israel at all. The Temple had been rebuilt but there was no powerful presence, or “glory,” of God residing in it, as there had been in the first Temple of Solomon.⁹ However, the prophets such as Joel, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah were clear that in the end time the Spirit of the Lord would come again and would be widely disseminated. It began with Jesus Christ; the Spirit, widely diffused in the Old Testament was uniquely concentrated in the person of Jesus while he was Earth - and Luke mentions this many times.¹⁰ He also said that just prior to Jesus ascending to the Father, he commanded his followers: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”¹¹

¹ Luke 1:8-20; 26-38. See also the angelic visit to the shepherds in Luke 2:8-14.

² Luke 3:21-22.

³ Luke 9:28-36.

⁴ Luke 24:4-9.

⁵ Acts 1:1-11.

⁶ Acts 2:2.

⁷ Acts 2:12.

⁸ The *personhood* of the spirit of God is not prominent in the OT, but emerges in NT and most clearly in the post-biblical doctrine of the Trinity.

⁹ John 1:14 speaks of that divine presence, “glory,” as being *in* Jesus – thus Jesus is the new “Temple.” See also 1 Cor 6:19.

¹⁰ For example, see Luke 4:1, 14, 18, 33-44.

¹¹ Acts 1:4-5.

As Luke relates the Church's story, he identifies Pentecost as the big bang event that sets the events of the book of Acts into motion. When we hear the word "Pentecost" today, we think of "Pentecostals." For some that is off-putting because we associated that with emotionalism, "speaking in tongues," and even a propensity for hellfire sermons! But Luke places the birth of the church with the first major Jewish festival after the death of Jesus, namely, the Feast of Weeks, 50 days after the Passover and hence also known as "Pentecost." This festival marks the beginning of the wheat harvest, a celebration of the *first fruits* of the new crop. The *beginning* of the new community of followers of Jesus was also likely in Luke's mind, just the first fruits - with much more to follow. Coincidentally, because this feast occurs around the same period of time as the covenant-making moment at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19, it also became a celebration of the giving of the 10 Commandments to Moses. Pentecost then became an appropriate festival for recommitment and rededication, and hence was also a time of *pilgrimage* for devout Jews to visit Jerusalem from across the known world.

That being the case, Luke, in relating this incident, likely had in the back of his mind the prophecy from Jeremiah which said, "After those days, says the LORD: I will put my law *within them*, and I will write it on their *hearts*; and I will be their God, and they shall be *my people*."¹² Hear too the Divine word through the prophet Ezekiel: "I will give you a *new heart* and put a *new spirit* in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."¹³ This portrays the Holy Spirit, the divine guiding presence, as residing *within* people; we become *God's* people and are being enabled to live in God's ways.

But, I suggest there is even more to this connection with the Mosaic Law than that. As I mentioned earlier, Luke writes: "Suddenly a *sound* like a violent wind blowing came *from heaven* . . ."¹⁴ There is a rabbinic tradition that states that when the Law was given at Mount Sinai, the 10 Commandments were given with a *single sound*, and yet when the voice went forth it was divided into seven voices and then 70 tongues, so that "every people received the law in their own language!" This tradition is therefore being *re-enacted* at the first Pentecost after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, and this provides the context for the events of Acts chapter 2.

The disciples were all together in one place when God's mysterious presence came in *power*, as Jesus had promised.¹⁵ Luke's mention of a *violent wind* from heaven and *tongues of flame* means that the prophesied coming of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled beyond a doubt. What happened was that the untamable Holy Spirit filled *everyone* present; God does not give half-measures, but is lavish. The Spirit now belongs to everybody, not just to special people. And, according to Luke, in this first

¹² Jer 31:33. Recall too the Spirit of God bring the dry bones back to life; Ezek 37:1-14.

¹³ Ezek 36:26-27; see also Heb 8:10.

¹⁴ Acts 2:2, 6.

¹⁵ Acts 1:8.

instance they started speaking in other human languages.¹⁶ Devout Jews who were in Jerusalem for the pilgrimage from all corners of the Roman Empire were completely baffled because they *could* understand the disciples' message *in their own native languages*. Luke tells us that people were amazed and astonished, not least because in those speaking were common Galileans, who were not noted for their linguistic abilities. Moreover, it was *unnecessary* as everyone spoke Greek anyway! But this cleverly embodies that rabbinical tradition of the 70 languages of the world.

When something like this happens there is usually more than one response. One group asked: "What does all this mean"? Another group mocked, "They are all drunk on new wine"! In the face of this public skepticism, the Spirit of God spoke through Peter. One-third of the book of Acts is taken up with *speeches*, which was – in Luke's day - a well-established literary technique to explain the *meaning* of events. Moreover, the Old Testament prophets were commissioned by God before they spoke as his *messengers* to the people; for example, Isaiah had his lips touched by a purifying fire.¹⁷ In this context, the tongues of fire can therefore be additionally understood as freshly inspired prophetic speech. Luke was therefore emphasizing that Peter should be deemed as authentically interpreting the prophecies of the Jewish Scriptures and proclaiming God's message. His message was *insightful* and it was a speech that was not only simply boldly-delivered, but one that also *persuaded*. The effectiveness of that authority was demonstrated by how 3000 people responded and the church was born. This was a sure sign of God's continuing presence in Peter and the rest of the apostles.

Peter reinterprets Joel's prophecy as being fulfilled in these "last days." God *has* indeed fulfilled that promise, says Peter, and poured out his Spirit on *all* people in shockingly unconventional ways. The Spirit was given so that young and old people, both male *and female*, will proclaim God's activities. But it gets worse, God's Spirit was not just for kings and priests, but was "even" given to lowly *slaves*. Later on, we read how the Holy Spirit was also given to non-Jews!¹⁸ God's Spirit blows like a mighty wind and has no respect for status, gender, age, or race – *God's Spirit is for everybody*. He then goes on to say that we therefore need not live in fear, even if the very fabric of society is collapsing around us, because – and here Peter quotes from the prophet Joel - "*everyone* (not just Jews) who calls on the name of *Jesus* will be rescued on the Day of Judgment."¹⁹

That's all good news! But what else might all this mean for us today?

First, this era between Christ's first advent and his return are known as the "last days"; it is the age of the Holy Spirit and of mission. The task of the Spirit is simply to bear witness to Jesus. We should not regard anything as coming from the Holy Spirit if it does not relate credibly to the life and teaching of Jesus. At Christ's baptism, he was *assured* of his Son-ship both by the divine voice and the presence of the Spirit, and he was both commissioned for servanthood and equipped for the proclamation of the

¹⁶ This is "xenolalia," i.e., the ability to speak in a language which the individual has not learned, not "Glossolalia," i.e. "speaking in tongues" or unknown languages (babbling or incoherent) encountered in intense religious experiences.

¹⁷ Isa 6:7.

¹⁸ See Acts 10.

¹⁹ Acts 2:21.

kingdom of God. In the same way, our baptism assures *us* of our adoption in to God's family, and the Spirit sends us on that same mission of costly servanthood and gives *us* the power for both bold witness and in living out the kingdom of God, especially in hard times.

Second, today the Church speaks of being baptized by water in the name of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Consequently, the Baptism in the Holy Spirit gets doctrinally all wrapped up in our own water baptism.²⁰ Baptism in water is an initiation, and hence an initial blessing; it is a sign and seal of the Baptism of the Spirit as much as it is about the forgiveness of sins and an assurance of our identity in the risen Christ. While there is ONE baptism, the biblical exhortation is to be "continually filled" with the Holy Spirit. This is something that can happen multiple times throughout our life, and often accompanies Holy Communion. At such times, we can become *more* acutely aware of God's *presence* with us, after all, we say: "The Lord is here, his Spirit is with us." Of course we are not going to be filled with the Spirit to the extent Jesus was, and we must also remember that the Spirit is given to the *Church* and therefore benefits a community, not just the individual.

Third, what are the characteristics of those who are "filled with the Spirit"? Again look to Acts for a summary. They were given divine courage to speak against those who would suppress the good news concerning Jesus. They were united in prayer. They are empowered to do social work. They were encouraged to build and lead a holy life. So when you delight at seeing God at work in *others* that is a sign of the presence of God's Spirit within *you*! When you have strength to endure, one that you recognize is not of your own doing,²¹ or experience a profound sense of peace in challenging circumstances, those are signs of God's Spirit within you – something we often tend to see better with hindsight. The Spirit gives us power to resist temptation. God's Spirit is also present when we are able to recognize evil and have the courage to denounce it. That not only is a prophetic role to our culture, but advocates for speaking-up with wisdom and grace in confrontational situations. In this way, we partner with God in proclamation and doing what we can to actively bring good out of evil. Acts 5:32 speaks of the Spirit whom "God has given to those who obey him." In other words the degree to which the Spirit resides in us is, to some extent, conditioned by the kind of people we are. We still retain our free will for God's Spirit will not force himself upon us.

Fourth, how does the Holy Spirit operate in the Church? Again look to Acts for a summary. The people were *thrilled to belong*. They were *keen to pray*, they were *bold to speak*, they were *hungry to learn*, they were *willing to give* of their money, they were *united*, not divided, and they were *longing to share* what they had with others. Those are just some of the qualities we find early in Acts when the Spirit came. Yes, they were the dramas of tongues, healings, and deliverances too, but they are not a necessary requirement to show that God is at work in our lives. Many times in the life of the church the Spirit works softly and secretly, quietly transforming people's lives and situations without any fuss or noise. But we should always expect the untamed wind of the Spirit to be unpredictable. But the

²⁰ Whether the baptism is "in" or "with" or "by" the Holy Spirit is irrelevant; "*en*" is just a small word in Greek, one which can be easily translated in different ways.

²¹ See Rom 8.

qualities of joy, boldness, prayer, generosity and a hunger to learn are universal indicators of the presence of the Holy Spirit. And they are indispensable in any church that seeks to grow!

The Holy Spirit is not, then, the prerogative of the Pentecostals or charismatics, but is for *all* Christians. And Jesus says all we need to do is to *ask* to be filled. However often we are “filled” we will soon need filling again, since we leak like a colander. This reminds us of our need to be dependent upon God, and not upon ourselves. Being “filled with the Spirit” is not a state which we can claim as a permanent possession, it is a continual reminder that we must come again and again to the Source of the Waters of Life and to be replenished.²² Just as Holy Communion (which we will celebrate next week) is to be constantly repeated until Christ returns, so we need to be continually be refilled by the Spirit.

I end today with the words Luke’s gospel relates concerning Jesus’ teaching on prayer:

⁹ So I say to you: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.¹¹ “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”²³ Amen.

²² See John 4:13-14; 7:28-39.

²³ Luke 11:9-13.