

Acts 2:1-21

“Pentecost”, No. 4

September 13, 2015

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

The disciples had been instructed by the Lord before his Ascension to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. This is what they did, spending their time in prayer and preparation as we saw last time.

Text Comment

- v.1 Pentecost, the Old Testament’s Feast of Weeks, was the second of the three great pilgrimage feasts of the Jewish liturgical calendar. It fell 50 days after the Sunday after Passover, hence the name: “Pentecost” is the English form of the Greek word “fifty.”
- v.3 Remember John the Baptist’s prophecy that Jesus Christ would baptize not with water but with the Spirit and with fire. In the Bible wind is a sign of God’s presence and so is fire (whether in cleansing or judgment). Also take note of the qualifications: the sound *was like* a violent wind (but there was no wind, just the sound of one); what they saw were tongues *as of* fire. It was not fire, but it looked like fire. An eye-witness touch.
- v.4 “Filled with the Spirit” here means the same thing as “baptized with the Holy Spirit” in 1:5. They are different ways of describing the influence of the Holy Spirit upon a person.
- “Other tongues” as the context will soon make clear, means simply other languages. Here we are not told that they spoke what was like another language or what seemed to be another language. They spoke other languages. “Tongue” is, in fact, the ordinary Greek word for human language. Aramaic, Greek, Latin, and now French or English are different “tongues” in that sense. So what is being described is a true miracle: a person speaking intelligibly a language he or she has never learned.
- v.5 A typical hyperbole. The point of the exaggeration is to emphasize that people were there from various tongues, tribes, and nations, a representative cross-section of the world. The coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus had said, would mean that salvation would spread to the whole world. And so it was that the Spirit descended when, as it were, the world was present to receive the good news.
- v.6 As we read in v. 2, they were in a house when the Spirit came upon them, but they left the house to declare the mighty works of God (v. 11). It is highly important, as far as the meaning of Pentecost is concerned, that the experience of this filling by the Spirit compelled the disciples to find other people.

That is, Latin speakers from Rome were hearing the good news in Latin, Egyptians in Egyptian, Parthians and Medes were hearing that same news in their native tongues, even though the disciples did not know how to speak those languages. The miracle of Pentecost was apparently only that the disciples were able to speak languages that they

had not learned. There was no miracle in the hearing of what they said; for the foreigners present were simply hearing their languages being spoken. Of course *they* knew what was said. The miracle was in the speaking, not the hearing.

- v.7 Galileans had a reputation for being uncultured; not the sort of people who could be expected to know the exotic languages of far distant peoples.
- v.8 “own native language” confirms that it was these many different languages that the disciples were speaking.
- v.9 He begins with the peoples who lived in what are modern day Iran and Iraq.
- v.11 The list contains nations and peoples east, west, north, and south of Jerusalem, again an image of the whole world. “Proselytes” were converts to Judaism from other ethnic and national backgrounds.
- v.13 Others didn’t understand what was being said because the disciples were not speaking Aramaic. They said the men were drunk. The fact that they made fun of them may well indicate that they knew very well these men were not drunk. They were less confused than they were afraid. It is a typical ploy to mock what one fears.
- v.17 With his introductory comment and with his addition of the phrase “In the last days...,” a phrase that in the New Testament refers to the age inaugurated by the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ and extending to his Second Coming, Peter asserts that what the people were seeing was nothing less than the fulfillment of prophecy. Joel did not say “In the last days...” but by introducing his prophecy with this editorial remark, Peter made the point that what the people were witnessing was part of the great work of God in the world that the prophets had foretold.
- v.19 These natural convulsions are conventional images or metaphors in the prophets for great demonstrations of the power and presence of God.
- v.21 In other words, now is the day of salvation for the entire world. The Day of Judgment is coming, but the day of salvation for all has come and the proclamation of the good news will continue until the end. Everyone will not be saved; only those who call on the name of the Lord. Notice that a prophecy in Joel about God, about Yahweh, is here applied to Jesus Christ.

When God first called Abraham, some two-thousand years before Pentecost, he promised him that the whole world would be blessed through him. But through the long reaches of the centuries that followed, the kingdom of God, the knowledge of the true and living God, the experience of his grace and salvation were largely – not exclusively but largely – confined to the people of Israel. But again and again they were reminded that God had not forgotten the rest of the world. The nations were also his creatures and the day would come when the nations would hear his voice and believe and be saved.

The prophets of Israel had much to say about a coming day when the Spirit of God would be poured out on all mankind. Then, just before the appearance of the Lord Jesus, John the Baptist, his forerunner, had promised that when the Messiah appeared, he would baptize with the consuming and purifying fire of the Holy Spirit. The Bible long looked forward to the event described in the verses we just read as the culmination of the work of salvation, as the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that through him all the nations of the world would be blessed. That is why the great Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, described Pentecost as "the third great work of God," after creation and the incarnation of God the Son. That is how fundamental Pentecost is to the story of salvation, the story that is the Bible's principle theme.

What, after all, is the end point of history and, in particular, the end point of the history of salvation? We have it in Revelation 7:9:

"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes...and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"

Pentecost is the moment when *that* became possible, when the gospel burst out of its Jewish boundaries and took wing. Pentecost marks the beginning of the progress of salvation and eternal life to the four corners of the earth. We who are sitting in this sanctuary this morning are among the hundreds of millions who are the fruit of Pentecost! The Lord had told his disciples before he left the world that when the Spirit came *they would be his witnesses* in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the end of the earth. *And that is precisely what happened.* Pentecost provided the means by which the church would bear witness to Jesus Christ across the earth; Pentecost made the church and all the Christians in her the means of God's grace to the world. There was no Great Commission in the OT, there was no Great Commission in the New until the eve of Pentecost. There was no point in telling Christians to evangelize the world until that work was possible of success. Pentecost made it possible. When Luke wrote this in the mid-sixties of the first century, the Christian church was still quite small, though growing rapidly enough. It was still beset by opposition on every side. How did Luke know that the gospel would go from that point in his lifetime to overspread the world, and when embraced through to ages hundreds upon hundreds of millions of people and now thousands of millions of people, would stream into the church of God? How could he have known that? A very unlikely thing, humanly speaking, as we will see. He knew it because God had said that this would be the effect of the coming of the Holy Spirit, and when the Holy Spirit came this was its immediate effect and that effect continued to spread wherever the gospel went.

And so the event of Pentecost took on the character that it did.

I. First it was an event that in its very nature betrayed God's interest in the salvation of the world.

These multitudes that gathered in Jerusalem from all the countries roundabout were all Jews, to be sure, gathered to celebrate a Jewish feast. But at the moment the important thing about them was not that they were Jews, but that they had come from and would return to so many different

countries where so many languages were spoken. Luke regards them as representing the whole world, hence his dramatic exaggeration in v. 5: “devout men from every nation under heaven.” Jesus had told his disciples that “when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself.” *That* is the point of the particular shape of the Pentecost event. That is also why it happened in Jerusalem. That’s why it happened at this feast. The city was full of people from all over the world. Accent falls on the fact that the peoples of the world were hearing about Jesus Christ in their own languages. “For one brief moment of time, the divisions in humanity expressed through language difference were overcome.” [Peterson, 136] All sorts of peoples were hearing the good news! They could have heard that news in translation, but instead on that day God did a miracle so that they could hear that news in their own languages. Why? *So that we would know what Pentecost means!*

Now, in that one case, it was a miracle. A dramatic sign of what Pentecost would mean in the years, even ages to come. The miracle would not long continue – people would not long be able to speak languages they never learned (some perhaps never did it again), but the reality of which it was a powerful sign or illustration – people hearing the gospel in their own language – would continue and continues today.

But it would, of course, not be so easy in years to come. Missionaries would have to submit to the very hard work of learning the languages of the people to whom they were sent. Irenaeus, a second-century churchman, who studied under a man who knew the Apostle John personally – so not so far removed from Pentecost – became a missionary to Gaul, what is nowadays the south of France, especially the city of Lyon, today France’s second city. In the preface to his great work of Christian apologetics, a defense of the faith entitled *Against Heresies* and published in A.D. 180, Irenaeus apologized to his readers for his lack of elegance in Greek writing style. The problem, he said, was that he had spent so much time and energy learning the language of the Gauls and had spoken it for so long that he hadn’t retained the refinements of Greek style that once came naturally to him. But he brought the gospel to a nation that didn’t know it! [I, 3] That is Pentecost without the sign miracle!

Through the ages multitudes of Christian missionaries had to do the exhausting work of becoming linguists in order to fulfill their gospel calling. They had first to master the tongue of the people to whom they had been sent so that they could explain the gospel to them in words they could understand. This was true of the early missionaries, Ulfilas in the 4th century, Columba in the 6th century, and Boniface in the 8th century. And it has been true ever since. Robert Morrison, the first modern missionary to reach China had to learn Mandarin before he could preach Christ in that language. William Carey, the first of thousands of missionaries sent to India, had to learn a new language, publish a grammar and a dictionary, and translate the Bible into Bengali before he could make any real progress in explaining the good news to the people of the Indian sub-continent. Henry Martyn would do the same in Persia some decades later. By this means the Holy Spirit has made vast multitudes of people into followers of Christ all over the world. We are soon to welcome a young couple, a PCA minister and his wife and young son, who are coming to the area so that he can do a two-year masters in Burmese studies at the University of Washington. Why? Because he is going to do gospel work in Burma, now called Myanmar, and to do that he needs to be able to speak the language and understand the culture.

You can't explain how Christ came to save sinners if the people whom you are speaking to don't understand the words you speak. It seems so simple, but it was precisely this barrier that was breached at Pentecost and breached so that it would continue to be breached thereafter.

2. Second, the event of Pentecost illustrated in the actual nature of the event itself the Spirit's power to open hearts to the truth about Jesus Christ.

Now, we don't have all of the evidence of that before us this morning. We will read next time of the fact that Peter's sermon persuaded some three-thousand people at once that Jesus was Lord and their only hope of salvation. But already the point has been made in v. 11. The foreigners who heard the disciples speaking in their own languages understood the gist of the message. God had done wonders. God had performed mighty works in Jesus of Nazareth. This was a message they needed to hear and a message a great many would rejoice to hear.

Again, the miraculous element would fall away, but the fact remains that the Holy Spirit could convince even the most stubborn heart that Jesus is Lord, that men are sinners and need salvation, and that only Christ can give it to them.

You can't read the Bible and suppose that miracles are to be the ordinary stuff of Christian life and witness. They were very rare even in biblical times. They would be less and less a feature of the apostle's ministry as we move through the book of Acts. If miracles were commonplace they wouldn't be miracles! In the same way, no one can read the Bible and think that sharing the good news is always going to be easy and uncomplicated work. It cost the apostles their lives and before they died they virtually worked themselves to death bringing the good news to the world. It may cost us a friendship, it may require courage to do it, and hard study to do it well. We know that.

That isn't what we need to be assured of. We don't need to know that our life will be easy and that bearing witness to Jesus to unbelieving people will be an uncomplicated assignment. We know that's not true. What we need to know, what we need to firmly believe is that the Word of God in the hands of the Holy Spirit is powerful to break the rock into pieces. We need to know that the Holy Spirit is with us to make our pitiful explanations of the good news attractive and convincing to others. What we need to know is that God really intends for us, for you and for me, to be the means of his saving grace to dying sinners whom we meet from day to day in the ordinary course of our lives. *And Pentecost is the proof of all of that.*

Peter's sermon on Pentecost resulted in 3,000 people confessing faith in Jesus Christ. Remarkable. I'm not sure the Lord Jesus had 3,000 converts at the end of his 3 years of ministry. That's the numerical difference the Holy Spirit is going to make. I don't suppose Peter ever preached a sermon again that resulted in a thousand conversions, much less 3,000. But again and again he preached and he explained the gospel to people, and many believed. People who shouldn't have believed, people who had no intention of believing in Jesus Christ, people who had never heard of Jesus Christ before, people who had to that point been hostile to the Christian message believed in Jesus and couldn't help but believe in Jesus. Wealthy, comfortable sophisticated people in the great cities of the world and unlettered peasants in primitive locales believed in Jesus when his story was told and most would have struggled to explain why. They

simply knew that what they had been told was true: they were sinners, guilty before God, and Jesus is was and must be the only one who could make sinners right before God. It was the Holy Spirit who did that, who opened their hearts to the truth, who convinced them of it. The apostles and then other Christians explained the gospel, but the Spirit of God did the convincing.

Consider for a moment how unlikely the spread of this message actually was at that time. Jesus was a Jew and that was certainly no help. Jews were not terribly popular then as so often now. People in the world today often object to Christianity for similar reasons: it is a Western religion or a white man's religion. Well, it was so in that day too. It was a Jewish sect. Jesus was born in Judea, a minor and troublesome province in a distant corner of the empire. Almost a tenth of the taxes Roman citizens had to pay went to maintain an army to keep the peace in Palestine. They resented it as Americans today resent having to pay for ventures in the Middle East. Imagine what we would think if people were telling us the Savior of the World came from Afghanistan! What is more, Jesus, by the Christians' own admission, was executed as a common criminal by the Roman governor of Judea. Hardly anyone's candidate to be the savior of the world! Still more, the message was, not to put too fine a point on it, preposterous by the intellectual standards of the world of that day. Salvation through crucifixion, the most ignominious form of death that that society knew? The resurrection of the body in a society that gloried in the soul? An ethical system that made hash of virtually all Greco-Roman standards of morality? Come on! It would have been hard to conceive of a message less credible, less likely to be acceptable to the Greco-Roman world than the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul himself once put it, the Jews were scandalized by it and the Greeks thought it was ridiculous.

And once Christians began to multiply, the gospel message had to bear a still further burden: the active displeasure and eventually violent opposition on the part of local governments and then the Roman authorities. Become a Christian and go to jail, or lose your job, or lose your friends! Who was going to sign on for that? The prospects of the gospel's success, humanly speaking, in other words, were zero to none! And yet the message did catch on, caught fire indeed, and spread rapidly to east and west. Christian preachers such as the apostle Paul entered cities, towns, and villages, told the story of Jesus Christ, urged people to believe in him and, lo and behold, they did, in ever increasing numbers. Paul explained his message to the sophisticated Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill, as we read in Acts 17, and several of them believed on the spot what should have struck them as an utterly unlikely story! Very quickly, by the middle of the first century, there were Christians to be found in all the great cities of the Mediterranean world and many more to the east of the Holy Land. The Spirit of God is not hindered by the prejudices of the human heart.

As a Christian, do you appreciate that there is nothing like this in the other religions: the message of divine love for human beings being spread by those who have discovered that love for themselves. There is certainly nothing remotely like it in the secular philosophies of mankind. That God the creator of heaven and earth, your maker, has love to show to everyone, that he has always desired the salvation of all mankind, that he never intended any other result but that his people should be drawn from every tongue, tribe, and nation on the earth: this grand vision is unique to Christianity. And so is the notion that he would save unworthy people from their sins by the sacrifice of his son, *precisely so that they might then become the means of his saving others*. The love of *others*, the salvation of *others*, a deep desire for the blessing and happiness

and goodness *of others, indeed for the whole race of human beings*: this lies in the heart of both the history and the message of our faith *and our faith alone*.

The Bible is far, far from teaching the virtue of nonattachment, such as you find in Buddhism. Buddha said, “He who has no love has no woe.” But the Christian message, on the contrary, is encapsulated in the Lord’s instruction to his disciples: “As I have loved you, so love one another.” Nor is Christianity animated by the desire for power, as is Islam. Whenever Christian kings and nations have sought to compel conversion, they have betrayed the faith, not served it. As on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit reconciles men to God by persuasion and draws them by truth and love.

It is in *this unique and wonderful context* that Pentecost finds its great meaning – alongside the cross and the resurrection – as one of the few defining moments in the history of the world. Our Lord, near the end of his ministry, said that the coming of the Holy Spirit would mark the next epoch in his work of salvation in the world. In the book of Acts there is no doubt that Pentecost marks the beginning of the gospel’s campaign of conquest in the world. As John Stott puts it: “Pentecost was essentially a missionary event.” [*The Incomparable Christ*, 165]

We prayed this morning for the believers in India’s Manipur State, in the far northeast of the country. Our Christian friends there are tribal people who live in or came from the hills and relations are once again tense with the Hindu Meiteis who live in the valleys. In 1975 I spent a month in India at Presbyterian Theological Seminary, then located in Roorkee, in Uttar Pradesh, far across India to the west. There I met a student, about my age at the time, probably 26 or 27, Nipamacha Singh. He was a Meitei, far from home. Nipamacha grew up in an orthodox Hindu home; his parents worshipped the various gods and their household god. In 1894 an English missionary, William Pettigrew, had begun work on a translation of the Bible into the Meitei language, but was forbidden by the Maharajah of Manipur to preach among the Hindus, so he began preaching to the illiterate hill peoples, the tribals. The tribal people became Christians in large numbers, but the Meiteis despise them as outcasts and yokels, not unlike what people thought of Galileans in Jesus’ day. Nipamacha, a good Meitei, was raised to despise Christians as country bumpkins, yokels who followed a religion greatly inferior to Hinduism.

But, when a college student, a teacher gave Nipamacha a New Testament. And out of politeness he began reading and before long he could not resist the message he was reading. Soon thereafter he was a Christian, the first in his village of some 8,000 souls and one of only a handful of Meitei believers. His family demanded that he recant his new faith upon peril of being cast out of the family but he refused; he lost his friends, he was beaten by a mob. He took refuge among the tribal believers, whom he had before despised, who loved him and cared for him and eventually saw his gifts and sent him off to the other side of India to go to seminary. After seminary he returned to his people as an evangelist: many of his family members became Christians, churches were established. One of his early converts wrote Christian music for Meiteis to sing. In 1978 he became the first ever ordained Christian minister among the million-strong Meiteis. By the early 1990s there were some 2,000 Meitei believers in twenty churches, almost all because of the ministry of Nipamacha. That, my friends, is the meaning and the result of Pentecost. And such stories multiply all over the world every single day! Believers in Jesus in northeast India and Tacoma, Washington: they as we have heard the wonders of God in our own language. What is

our calling as Christians after Pentecost? I love this definition from the Anglican archbishop William Temple:

“To evangelize [a word that means to preach the Good News, declare the Good News] is so to present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men shall come to put their trust in God through him, to accept him as their Savior, and serve him as their king in the fellowship of the church.”

It was the same William Temple who reminds us that the Christian church “is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members.” Pentecost.