

## DAY OF PENTECOST    MAY 31, 2020    ST. ALBAN'S STATEN ISLAND

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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In order to get the most out of our annual celebration of the Day of Pentecost, we need to remind ourselves of a range of background elements without which the meaning of the day can get utterly lost. First, Pentecost was a Jewish harvest festival celebrated 50 days after Passover. It was one of three great pilgrim festivals that brought Jews from all over the known world to Jerusalem. The word for Jews in the text more accurately suggests that they were residents of Judea, not that they represented a unique ethnic group. Both the Old Testament reading from Joel and the reading in Acts itself speak to the basic Jewishness of the event. Gentiles are not even mentioned even if the larger context points to their ultimate inclusion. It would be more accurate to say that this “gathering of the scattered family of Israel will involve reconciliation with Gentiles who are included within the family” of mankind. But much of that development lay in the future.

The gathering itself was of what we call the Diaspora, Jews from every part of the Mediterranean basin, a kind of “faithful remnant” of Israel. Since religion was “an essential part of cultural life and identity” at the time, Jews tended to be known “as much for their origins in Judea and their distinct dietary practices as they were for the monotheistic religion of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. With repeated invasions of the homeland, many residents of Judea were forced to flee Palestine. Wherever they settled, and many tended to stay and not return to the homeland even when danger receded, “these exiles retained many of their ethnic and religious characteristics, even while adapting to their new residences.” They evolved new, hyphenated identities as Jewish Egyptians, Jewish Syrians, etc. It is this scattered group of devout Jews, many of whom had experienced extensive exile, who were assembled on Pentecost. They were likely “descendants of several generations of Jews who had lived outside of Palestine” but retained their original identity.

The primary theme in Joel is the call to repentance “in the face of impending judgment.” The Day of the Lord includes both judgment and promise. God will intervene here “by pouring out his Spirit (his *ruah* or breath), the same Spirit which was the agent at Creation and promises to bring about a new creation. “The Psalm for the day tells us that with his power, Yahweh will establish life in full fellowship among the deprived, the imperilled, and the disadvantaged. All, without exception, will be empowered by the certainty of God’s intervention on his people’s behalf.” And at this outpouring, all distinctions of gender, age, and class will retreat.” But what makes this revolutionary is that normally the Spirit was given only to the few (to judges, kings, and prophets), and even then, only sporadically.” In Acts the promise given to Peter is to “you and your children” which simply emphasizes the Jewishness of the event.

Although the story of the Tower of Babel is normally referenced on the Day of Pentecost in Christian churches today (because it demonstrates a reversal of the confusion of tongues experienced at Babel), there is also a rabbinic tradition that at Sinai all Israel heard the Ten Commandments “because the voice of God was divided into seven voices and then seventy tongues. It is certainly likely that those who witnessed the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost “understood the event as a parallel to the experience of Sinai....so that Pentecost was a continuation of Sinai, a fulfillment which in effect ‘exploded’ the original Sinai experience beyond all expectations.

We need also to recall that Acts is simply volume 2 of a two-volume work written by the same evangelist and is referred to as Luke-Acts. And this means that Acts can only be understood in connection with the larger theme of the Gospel of Luke. It is “the story of God’s Spirit as the sign of the end of times.” At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus stood in the synagogue and read Isaiah 61 (“the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor”). His ministry began with the gift of the Spirit “for the sake of the world.” And the writer shows us “how deeply grounded the new covenant is in the old. Jesus cannot explain his own ministry without reference to the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, and Peter can’t explain it without reference to the book of Joel. Thus, “neither Jesus nor the church is comprehensible apart from Israel’s story and Israel’s hope.

I point this out because we frequently downplay that critical element in the gospel accounts. As 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, we are not nearly as familiar with the Old Testament as we are with the New, and there have been moments in Christian history when efforts were actually made to eliminate the Old Testament from the Bible on grounds that the God of Moses and Isaiah is not the same God as that of Jesus, the disciples and St. Paul. This is an absurd contention. Ours is one long, complicated story, which is not limited to the history of the early church and somehow in isolation from the long traditions of Judaism. Jesus is incomprehensible without the books of the Old Testament as the essential backdrop.

So, to return for the moment to the frequent comparisons of Pentecost and the Tower of Babel, it probably speaks to a significant misunderstanding of the meaning of what we are celebrating today. If we see Pentecost as somehow a reversal of the meaning of the Tower story, it can seem to us that God originally punished his created world with different languages and cultures. Rather, what happens at Pentecost is that “God, through the Holy Spirit, chooses to meet us *where we are*, in the midst of a multitude of languages and experiences.” At Pentecost, “God speaks in Aramaic and Greek and the other ancient languages” while today this extends to Spanish, Czech, Russian, Hindi and Mandarin. Which is another way of saying that “God joins us in the midst of the messiness and the difficulties of speaking different languages, eating different foods and living in different cultures.”

The story of Pentecost continues beyond the gift of the tongues of fire. In Acts 8, Philip interprets scripture to the Ethiopian eunuch. In Acts 9, a Jewish leader names Saul is overpowered on the road to

Damascus and recruited...to spread the Gospel to the Gentiles. And in Acts 10, Peter has a compelling dream in which he recognizes that Pentecost is for people of all kinds. Thus, in rethinking what he knows, Peter has to acknowledge that when God says in Joel that he will “pour out his Spirit upon all flesh,” he means ALL flesh, no exceptions. There are scholars today who see the account of Pentecost as Luke’s effort to “weaken the prevailing ethnic infrastructure so that a new foundation might burst forth....a vision transcends facile ethnic divisions without forsaking the importance of ethnic identity” --- a kind of “glimpse of God’s bigger vision for God’s people.” Peter’s sermon proclaims that God’s spirit shall be “poured out upon all flesh and everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”

What Luke is showing us, then, is that “written into the very structure of the ‘kingdom of Israel’ is a certain diffusion that simultaneously structures the *possibility* of Israel and the *impossibility* of ‘restoring the kingdom of Israel.’ And this takes us all the way back to Abraham and the promise made by God that he would be the father of many nations, that God would multiply his descendants and make them as numerous as the stars of the sky, and that through them he would bring a blessing to all the families of the earth.”

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

#### Sources

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