

Sunday Scribbling's No.10 – Pentecost

Lectionary readings¹ for today are;

Acts 2:1-21. Psalm 104:26-35. 1 Corinthians 12: 3b-13. John 20:19-23.

In our liturgical calendar, this Sunday is 'Pentecost'; the fiftieth day after Easter, which celebrates the day that God chose to send the Holy Ghost to the disciples. Interestingly, it is also the same day as the Jewish Festival of Weeks, otherwise known as 'Shavout', when the new grain and first fruits of the harvest are celebrated and offered to God. How strange (or not, as I think) that God chose to align these two days.

With this in mind, what do you think might be the message that God is trying to send to the new Christians in Jerusalem some 2000 odd years ago?

Matthew 5:17 gives us a clue; **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.”**

So perhaps ... 'new grain + new fruit' morphs into 'new faith + new hope = new life'.

On the other hand, maybe this formula makes more sense to you: $\Sigma: 2N + 3N = A\&\Omega$

Now take a look at our Acts 2:1-21 reading. It is a good chunk of text, but one that you will be familiar with so let's now see if we can add to our understanding as there are some 'confusing' concepts we need to try and get to grips with if we are to broaden our understanding of the concept of Pentecost.

***** Acts 2:1-21 *****

Take a close look at this map².



We know that Luke, by profession, is recorded as being a physician which might lead us to believe that he had an ordered and logical mind.

But Luke lists the countries of the people attending the Jerusalem celebrations in this order; **“⁹Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism)”**; and then suddenly adds on the end; **“Cretans and Arabs.”**

Why such mental chaos for an educated man?

You might well ask as none of the commentaries that I've read can shed any light on this.

What do you think?

Well, that's a conundrum I'll let you mull over as I want to go back a bit and think about **“the tongues of fire”** and **“speaking in tongues”**, both concepts that are easy to picture, but difficult to assimilate.

Yet again, we must remember that we are using meager earthly words and limited human brains to try and understand an extraordinary manifestation of God ... so please be gentle with your criticism.

Right from the 'Get-go' we learn that God knows a thing or two about teaching. He knows that in order to get a human's full attention He needs to involve all of our senses. He knows that for maximum comprehension and impact we need to have our three main sensory channels operating at the same time if the disciples are to receive and remember the information He is about to give them. The modalities, or senses, that need activating are; auditory, visual and tactile/kinesthetic³.

“² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.”

First; God invokes the auditory sensation and the people hear a **“violent wind”**.

Secondly; God invokes a powerful visual sensation with the image of a flame; the concept of a refiners fire of purity and the flame of sanctity would not be lost on the disciples.

“³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.”

Some commentators, and the KJV, have described the **“the tongues of fire that separated”** as 'cloven hoof's'. I'm uncomfortable with that as it has connotations of evil and witchcraft associated with it. To me it seems far more likely that Luke is describing the fact that a flame divided and settled upon each individual disciple so as to make sure that everyone had a Holy flame and thereby received the full baptism experience.

Thirdly; God invokes the tactile/kinesthetic sensory channel by having all the disciples moving as a group, jostling each other, and looking in awe at the many tongues of fire in the room thereby ensuring that the physical experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit was not only real, but fully experienced and remembered. Now, there is no going back – Jesus' promised 'Helper'. The Holy Ghost has arrived and they, like us, are no longer orphans.

“⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” (NIV)

“⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (KJV)

Note the slightly different ending. “**Enabled them**” -v- “**Utterance**”.

Many of us, myself included, have difficulty in understanding and accepting how completely different nationalities were, according to some interpretations, suddenly able to speak and understand a number of other completely different languages.

Why would God do this and what was the point of this ‘skill’ as it is neither a transferable nor a replicable skill? It just does not make sense. And in other biblical passages that refer to speaking in tongues there is no implication of anyone ever speaking another language (as we know it).

1 Corinthians 14:2 seems to me to have the most sensible interpretation; **“² For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit.”**

Martyn Percy (Dean of Christ Church, University of Oxford) also explains; “The more common tradition of speaking in tongues is that which Paul describes as ‘sighs and sounds too deep for words’. But most linguists and psychologists agree that whatever these ‘tongues’ are, they do not add up to a language. It is more like an ecstatic utterance, a kind of ‘sound salad’ that is full of feeling and meaning, but with no vocabulary, grammar or anything else that could enable it to be translated. It is the articulation of the unutterable⁴.”

In other words, the speaking in tongues as recorded by Luke refers not to a language or human communication, but is an “*expression to God*⁵.”

And with this heavenly display the Church is born and Peter starts to preach.

“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!”

Verse 15 has always seemed to me to be somewhat out of context here in such a serious and important event, namely the official launch of the new Christian Church. That said, I can see why one might think that people talking in tongues at 9AM were drunk, but why mention it? What’s the relevance here?

The answer lies in understanding the Jewish festival system and thereby the onlookers perceptions. “50 days from the morrow of the Sabbath of the Passover octave occurred the Pentecost of New Grain; 50 days from the morrow of the Pentecost of New Grain, the Pentecost of New Wine; and 50 days from the morrow of the Pentecost of New Wine, the Pentecost of New Oil.⁶”

Temple Laws were such that all Jews, including those living in the diaspora, were required to visit the temple three times a year (If at all possible), and preferably at festival time. So the concept of ‘party’ and ‘festival’ would have been pre-eminent in their minds, especially as they looked forward to the coming Festival of New wine.

Now jump to our Gospel reading for today and have a quick read of today's four verses whilst remembering that this is referring to a period before the crucifixion.

“²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

With our new and hopefully better understanding of the importance of Pentecost, now note the extraordinary power and responsibility that Jesus has given each and every one of us. Couple this with the full sensory experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit and imagine how the newly minted disciples would be feeling. I'd hazard a guess at nothing short of extraordinary.

***** 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 *****

As we move into our final passage for today it will come as no surprise to read that, once again, they are all 'linked' as Paul is writing to the Corinthians in Corinth about 'Spiritual Gifts'.

“Corinth was an important city in Paul's day. Generally known as a city devoted to pleasure seeking. It was a centre for Greek culture and a busy commercial city with a cosmopolitan atmosphere that brought together people and customs from different parts of the world. Pagan religions with sexual rites and ceremonies existed, and both materialism and immorality were the accepted order of the day.⁷”

You can imagine how their life style and belief system would not fit with Paul's newfound spiritual direction and belief in Jesus. The interesting thing here is how he explains that we are all different in our understanding of the gifts of the Spirit, as we all have different gifts: **“⁴ There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.”**

This is a really important point to grasp as all of them are important in God's eyes. He gave us different skills so that when we work together, as a whole, we are the hands, the feet and the body of Christ; in the here and now, here on earth. Just as our body is made up of many parts, so it is with the body of Christ here on earth.

Question: What use would we be to God if, for example;

- We all made cakes.
- Or if we all wanted to do the flower arranging.
- Or if no-one wanted to visit the sick.
- Or if no-one was willing to bury the dead.
- Or if we were all Scribbling to each other at the same time.

Answer: None. Absolutely none at all.

Paul continues; “¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongue.”

Note that there is no mention of language, but that some may be able to interpret the message of the tongue.

That’s not a skill I have been given. But I wonder if you have?

As this scribbling comes to an end so does Passiontide; The Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost. After this locked down roller coaster of a ride I’d like you to rest in the truthful knowledge that we have not been left to fend for ourselves as orphans (John 14.18a), but as fully fledged members of Christ’s community of love and hope, supported by the Holy Ghost.

Now sit back, close your eye’s and ‘see if you can picture’ the Holy Ghost in the form of a flame resting upon you ... looking after you ... loving you just as both God and Christ love you. Rest and be peaceful in the sure knowledge that Jesus, as He promised, is here to love and look after you. (John 14.18b).

Amen.

To finish a short prayer based on the words of Psalm 104:26-35.

Let us pray ...

²⁶There the ships go to and fro; and Leviathan.

²⁷All creatures look to you...

²⁸When you give it to them,
when you open your hand;

²⁹When you hide your face,
when you take away their breath;

³⁰When you send your Spirit

³¹May the glory of the Lord endure forever,

³²He who looks at the earth, and it trembles.

³³I will sing to the Lord all my life;

³⁴May my meditation be pleasing to him;

³⁵But may sinners vanish from the earth
and the wicked be no more.

Praise the Lord, my soul.

Praise the Lord.

Amen

1. All biblical passages from the NIV.

2. NIV Quest Study Bible, Copyright © 1994, 2003, 2011 by Zondervan.

3. <https://web.cortland.edu/andersmd/learning/modalities.htm>

4. Martyn Percy. 2014. “*The Bright Field*”. Canterbury Press. p199.

5. D.Hervieu–Leger. 2000. “*Religion as a Chain of Memory*”. Cambridge: Polity Press. p59

6. Fitzmyer, J. A. (2008). *The Acts of the Apostles: a new translation with introduction and commentary* (Vol. 31, p. 235). New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

7. <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/n/new-testament-of-the-bible/summary-and-analysis/1-and-2-corinthians>