

# Mission I: Gen 11:1-9; Acts, Ch 2

## Reflections on Pentecost

### The Germination of Faith & the Shaping of a Community

Other helpful scripture readings:

Rom. 8:26-27; Eph. 6:18; Jude 20 (Tongues as 'praying in the spirit.')

1 Cor. 14:27-28 (Tongues as prophecy.)

1 Cor. 12 & 13 (How spiritual gifts should be used.)

Romans 12 (List of spiritual gifts.)

#### Introduction

For Peter and the other apostles, Pentecost was an annual celebration that gave thanks for the fruits of the earth and the giving of God's law which in itself enabled life to flourish. Just as the festival of the Passover was given new meaning by the death and resurrection of Jesus, the feast of Pentecost was given new meaning by the power of the Spirit. Whilst other worshippers celebrated the harvest of the fields, the apostles celebrated a fresh anointing of the spirit which empowered them and convicted thousands of onlookers to become converts: the spirit enables a germination of faith.

There are three major features that I feel led to cover:

- (i) The fire that rest on the heads of the disciples.
- (ii) The speaking in tongues (which brings unity and conversion).
- (iii) 'Ruach' (the wind of the spirit) and His work in demolishing boundaries.

#### Tongues of Fire: Pentecost as a global event.

It would be a little strange if Luke had not included the tongues of fire in his account. It demonstrates God's presence upon and within the apostles alongside themes of holiness. However, questions such as, 'Why did the disciple's hair not get singed?!' overlook a key aspect of Jewish tradition. The Jews held that when the law was given to Moses at Mt. Sinai, light appeared in the heavens. From its core 70 tongues of fire shot out across the nations. This tale emphasised the global dimension of the event. Against this backdrop, the tongues of fire which rest on the apostles on the day of Pentecost are given fresh meaning. Pentecost is a global event that is as significant to the followers of Jesus as the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai.

#### Speaking in Tongues:

##### (ii) Good evangelism is sensitive towards the unchurched and flexible in its approach

The truth about the work of the spirit on the day of Pentecost is not simply about enabling people to hear the word. It is the spirit which drives the word of God home. It is useful to draw a distinction between hearing, listening, understanding and believing. Just because we can hear does not mean that we are listening. (Just ask my wife the number of times that she has to show tolerance as I hear her voice in the background, aren't paying any attention and am then provoked into paying attention the second time round!) Just because we are listening does not mean that we understand. (I remember when I was growing up as a child, standing on a platform at a train station, hearing an announcement and not understanding a word that was said. Or I might hear news that the train was delayed but did not know how the rest of our journey would be disrupted). Just because we understand the articles of faith does not mean that we believe them. (Wesley's second sermon, 'The Almost Christian' outlines how there are two types of Christian – the almost Christian and the altogether Christian. Both appear the same; only one is a believer, the other is not.)

The gift speaking in tongues is one of the most memorable elements of the Pentecost story. The first step in bringing new converts of the Church requires preaching and dialogue – Peter's Sermon is evidence of this. In any preaching it is important for us to be in the right place where people can hear us, and to speak in a language that they will understand. What puzzles me, and what many of the commentators fail to highlight, is that whilst the pilgrims to Jerusalem would have come from many different regions, the majority would have spoken in Greek – so why didn't the apostles simply use this as a common language?

Evangelism is more effective when we reflect genuinely on the world in which someone else lives – their language, their culture, their context - and seek to meet them where they are. To act in this way

is to give the message greater credibility. It is less imposing. It is about coming alongside people. To speak in someone else's native tongue is one way of doing this effectively. For example, think about how we might travel to France, visit a restaurant and speak to a waiter. If we speak in English we may not be well received. If we make the effort at least to speak in some broken French, a please, a thank you then the waiter is much more likely to respect the effort made on their part. Business is better if both parties make more of an effort. The restaurant owner cannot afford to think that she need not welcome people. The visitor could end up being disappointed with the meal if, out of ignorance, he orders the wrong thing.

There is a tendency in some of our Churches to think that we have been here, celebrating the faith across the generations – why should we change? We expect newcomers to be magically assimilated into our culture. It is ironic that whilst we have inherited the hymns of Charles Wesley, written in such plain English for the people of his day, we rarely seem to appreciate how they will sound like old fashioned Greek to people who have never heard them before. There is a vast cultural gap between Churched and unchurched, between nominal Christian and altogether Christian. It will not be breached by us carrying on doing what we have always been doing. Neither will it be served by focusing on only one style of worship.

Perhaps people find it intimidating to think of new ways of relating the gospel. Thankfully, I don't believe that evangelism relies solely on developing some new activity in the life of the Church. My experience is that evangelism starts with the welcome people receive when they attend Church, and the feeling that is within the community. If we can continue to welcome new people, genuinely welcome them, rather than smile at them, give them a hymnbook and guide them to a pew, our actions will speak far louder than our words. Jesus says that it is by the way that we love one another, that people will know that we are his disciples. (John 13:34-35) Because we are credible as Christians, the message is credible. Notice the reversal that takes place. It is not so much that the word is credible, and so people give it credence. It is that the people who carry the word are credible, which lends others to think about the gospel more seriously. Here God empowers the apostles. God can be seen at work in them as they draw alongside others as a consequence onlookers are more willing to think about the difference that faith can make to their lives.

*Helpful questions:*

- 1/ How do we allow God to be at work in our lives?*
- 2/ Why should we share the gospel in word and action?*
- 3/ What do we find easier – gossiping the gospel, showing it in action or just gossiping!?*
- 4/ How can we be better witnesses of the gospel?*
- 5/ How can we make the gospel message more accessible?*
- 6/ How can we help people understand the gospel?*

Speaking in Tongues:

(ii) Unity in the Spirit: The undoing of Babel

It seems odd, given the controversy surrounded the gift of tongues in the New Testament that within the Pentecost account it is linked directly to unity. To this day its manifestation receives a mixed response with strong opinions on both sides. Much of the difficulty is associated with variations in the appearance of the gift (alternative language vs. ecstatic utterances) and its use within congregations (private use in prayer vs. use within the congregation as a vehicle of prophecy). A deeper discussion of these themes is not possible here. What can be said is that in this context, the gift of tongues is a vehicle for unity as everyone is able to hear in their own language.

If the tongues of fire can be paralleled with the giving of the law in the desert, the gift of tongues can be seen as an undoing of the chaos at Babel. (Genesis 11) Here God's people, full of pride and self belief thought that they could show off to their neighbours by building a tower. The scriptures assert that offended by this, God frustrated their efforts by introducing language. Having been involved with a number of property schemes in the Church, even I can tell you that such things are hard enough to understand in plain English without my having to call in an interpreter because the architect happens to be French. (Please do not think that I have anything against the French.)

Hence in giving the gift of tongues at Pentecost, God undoes the chaos of Babel. The differences in context are profound. At Babel people were full of pride and their self-belief. As the biblical story of exodus, exile and incarnation unfold we become even more conscious of humanity's failings and the grace of God. By the day of Pentecost the apostles have grasped the fact that whatever their differences in outlook, whatever divisions, whatever troubles they face, the answer does not rest in

their understanding or efforts, it rests in their openness to God. They can do nothing. God can do everything. Granted, we respond to God, but in the beginning.....

The message is not so much that we should search after the gift of tongues (although any openness to the spiritual gifts and renewal is always a good thing.) We must guard against the dangers of pride and self-belief (as opposed to God belief) and of how this can rip through faith communities with devastating consequences. At Babel there was chaos. At Pentecost there was unity. The difference rests in our understanding of how we relate to God. We must begin by recognising our true place before God – and our equality with each other.

There are those on the day who mocked the apostles and how the spirit was clearly at work in them. Arguably, this kind of manifestation would have been nothing new to orthodox Jews. Whilst it was on the decline, the combination of prophecy and ecstatic utterance was a part of the Jewish tradition – and the people wished it rekindled. I am not surprised that some of the onlookers made the allegation that the apostles were drunk: there are those who respond similarly today. Occasionally people who struggle with the more extrovert aspects of charismatic renewal share their concerns about an over-exuberance or shallow emotionalism that seems to be at work in those present. John Wesley faced much the same opposition. In my experience, whilst we do need to guard ourselves against extremes, our personal struggle can reveal more about our own insecurities (God loves us for who we are and we do not have to respond in the same way) and our lack of humility (the way in which someone else expresses themselves spiritually is just as valid as our own). Perhaps we should guard ourselves against both the excesses of charismatic renewal and a brand of fundamentalist traditionalism that is unwilling to accept differences in how others express themselves. There is nothing wrong in accepting that we respond very differently in worship to our neighbour. It is another thing to say that we cannot live alongside them. Even if they do lift their arm directly in our line of vision when we are trying to read the words to hymns projected on a screen! Ideally within our Churches we need to be offering different styles of worship. In this way we can worship as part of the same community whilst ensuring that we do everything to meet diverse needs.

*Helpful questions:*

*Have you witnessed the gift of tongues in use?*

*How did it make you feel?*

*What are your spiritual gifts? (Romans 10, 1 Cor 12)*

*What other gifts do you bring?*

*Why does the use of the gifts cause difficulty in Corinth? (1 Cor 13)*

*When will the gifts cease? (1 Cor 13)*

*(Note denominational differences – some denominations hold that the gifts of the spirit ceased when the NT was completed, others when we die, others when we go to heaven etc)*

*Hint – begin by looking at the spiritual gifts and thinking of them literally, then move on to interpreting them more broadly.*

### (iii) The Spirit as a mighty wind demolishing boundaries

The final element of Pentecost is the way in which the spirit shatters boundaries that exist between people. Luke devotes much time to telling us the origins of those who witness this event. Whilst we can think of boundaries in geographic terms we can also think in terms of cultural differences. As we are all aware from Channel 4's Big Brother house, small differences in personality and cultural outlook can become the focus of much discontent. Luke's main point is that the gospel is intended for everyone. Faith in Christ and the outworking of Christian values becomes the key factor that draws people together. On the day of Pentecost the spirit moves, leading people to reflect on the love of the Father and life, death & resurrection of Jesus. The same spirit that hovered over the waters of creation hovers over Jerusalem and hovers over us today. He also hovers above the Big Brother house but I am not sure how much good he can do unless the housemates let him in. No matter how much we affirm the ability of God to do anything, we must not forget that our hearts need to be wide-open for his vision in us to be fulfilled.

The text does not say that a mighty wind came upon the apostles, it says like the sound of a mighty wind was heard. Nevertheless, elsewhere in the scriptures, the parallel between the spirit and the wind is made clear. Jesus says in John 3:8 'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.'

In my time as a minister, I have witnessed how even the smallest things can be the source of anxiety within people and tensions between people. Very often they reveal much deeper issues about

leadership and power. They are about who makes the decisions, who has greater significance than who. Regrettably they emerge when someone uses the wrong tea towel to help with the washing up, or is given permission by the minister in the Church to try something new. (I select these examples because I am pretty sure that these specifics cannot be found in my own context!) However, there is something about the invisibility and unpredictability of the spirit that challenges those of us who like to hold power or yearn to have more influence. When we pray 'Your Kingdom Come, Your will be done', we are not praying for our own personal kingdom and the success of our power games, we are praying for God's kingdom! Oh that God's kingdom would break through the domain of the kitchen, or the domain of the organ, or the domain of who gets to hand the books out.

The wonderful thing(?) about the wind is that if there is any opening, it will find a way in. When the Holy Spirit is among us, he will work in a way that surprises us, because God's ways are not necessarily our ways, and we can never comprehend to what extent God can transform lives. Alternatively we can feel offended because we want to do things our own way and God frustrates our efforts. At the same time, the Holy Spirit can be welcomed by all of us because there are boundaries within families, churches and communities that He can overcome. However, beware any suggestion that this will happen without any effort on our part. For example, the cultural and religious divide between Gentile and Jew which is evident in the New Testament was healed – but it took some stern words from Paul, much effort and a much time.

I can tell you, from my training as a Methodist Minister that living as part of a Christian Community is not the heavenly idyll that it should be. Nonetheless, the community of the Church, despite its many failings still remains the primary means by which God's mission and message is reflected to the world. It might not be perfect but with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, it can give us a spiritual home and transform our lives. When I think about how to solve the inevitable tensions that develop between people, I like the idea of confining the culprits to a shed, isolated in the middle of a field, only to be released when they have resolved their differences – or agreed to disagree. In our family we have developed a modern term for this – caravanning! Like a family living in the confined space of a caravan, it seems impossible, at times, to find the harmony that we so deeply desire. We are thrown together in a kind of close proximity that is not by the world's standards, luxurious. (but it beats camping!) We realise that it is about as good as we are going to get this side of heaven. We also realise when we are thrown together, we are forced to discover our true humanity. This is not a bad thing. It is certainly better than living in isolation. Life in the Church is much the same. Despite the tensions that do exist we will, more often than not, find a way through because we are called to live together and love each other. We are united in Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

*Helpful questions:*

*1/ Racism is one example of a cultural barrier that can have devastating consequences.*

*2/ Can we be racist without knowing it? Does racism have to be 'deliberate'?*

*Hint – think about the differences between how the Indian actress Shilpa Shetty faced racism in the big brother house, as did Emily Parr, a 19-year-old drama student from Bristol, who was evicted within hours of calling black housemate Charley Uchea a "nigger". (Plenty of internet references)*

*3/ How can Churches guard against becoming 'institutionally racist'?*

*4/ How does Christianity challenge racism?*

*5/ If the primary issue in the early Church was the split between Jew and Gentile, what are the divisions that need to be healed today?*

*6/ Do you know of anyone whose life has been radically changed through their coming to faith?*

*Reflect on this.*

*7/ Can you think of any examples where small changes in the life of a Church known to you caused pandemonium? Why was this the case? Was it justified?*