

PENTECOST

[*PENTECOST; GENESIS 11: 1-9, PSALM 104: 26-36, ACTS 2: 1-21, JOHN 14:8-17 & 25-27*]

Have you ever witnessed an attempt to communicate between two people who speak different languages? I remember as a young boy, having the opportunity to go off to Zaire (now the 'Democratic' Republic of Congo) to visit my brother, who was working at Garamba National Park on the border of the Sudan. On that trip I remember trying to communicate with our guide, Oliba, who spoke Congolese French. It was my brother who, rather sarcastically, pointed out to me that turning the volume up and emphasizing clearer diction would not help my communication problems. It's interesting how often we tend to turn up the volume when struggling to communicate, thinking that somehow that will get our message across.

Today's reading from Acts deals extensively with language and communication. The author of Luke's Gospel continues his story about Jesus in the Acts of the Apostles. The disciples are gathered together awaiting the coming of the promised helper who is to empower the disciples to continue the work of Christ. The helpers arrival is heralded by a rushing wind, what look like flames come to rest on the disciples heads and we are told that they speak in other tongues or languages. One could argue that God turns up the volume in light of the powerful rushing wind and the tongues of flame. However, there is understanding that that comes with the Spirit. Luke emphasizes that each person heard the message of Jesus in their own language. This it would appear is the primary purpose of the Spirit: to reveal Christ to us!

Later in Peter's Sermon he calls for the hearers to repent and be baptized. Let us remember that Peter is speaking to a Jewish audience. Many of whom would have supported the decision to crucify Jesus. Many did not consider Jesus to be the resurrected Son of God but merely one of many who claimed to be a messiah, and ended up disappointing. Often when we hear the word repent, we connect it with turning completely away from immorality. However, when Peter urges the crowd to repent he is in fact urging them to completely change their minds! To change their minds about Jesus and accept him as the resurrected Son of God, the messiah!

Are there ways in which we need to repent, to change our minds about Jesus? I think so, and it may be that we need to change our minds in exactly the opposite way to the crowds who heard Peter's sermon. Peter's audience did not need to be convinced of Jesus' humanity, it was all too clear. We who live 2000 odd years after the Jesus event are more likely to think of Jesus seated at the right hand of God... very far removed from us and our struggles. I think the modern church finds it far easier to gravitate toward the divinity of Jesus. Yet at Pentecost we are reminded that although Jesus has ascended he has sent the helper, the Spirit that we might be forever connected to Christ, to God.

Peter's second instruction to his audience is that they be baptized. Some of the shock of this statement is lost on us. No self-respecting Jew would consider submitting themselves to baptism. Baptism was a rite reserved for those outside the Jewish community who wished to become Jewish proselytes. It may be more appropriate for us to substitute the word baptism for humility, for that is what Peter is actually asking of his Jewish audience. The amazing thing is that over 3000 people are willing to humble themselves and the church is born! How could we as Anglicans be called to humble ourselves? Well, it's hard to be humble when we are perfect in every way... or are we?

I remember sitting in these pews during one of Ron Nicholson's Lent sessions. On that particular night Ron was dealing with the gifts of the Spirit. He put up a list of the gifts, gave us circular stickers and asked us to stick them next to the gifts we thought we had, or wanted. It was fascinating, if not unexpected, that there were only two dots next to the gift of evangelism. Not only is our congregation NOT made up of evangelists, no one wants to be an evangelist. I can relate to that, evangelists have a bad reputation as pushy salesmen or worse! Most of us, myself included, love to hide behind those wonderful words of St. Francis: "Preach the Gospel at all times, use words only when necessary". That's all good and well, but DO we act out the Gospel and what about those times when words are required?

I am sure that as the people of God who have received the Spirit, we ought to share the Gospel. It may be true that Christianity is growing in Africa, but the Anglican Church is in decline! I don't have all the answers as to how we should go about evangelizing our context. However, let me make just one suggestion. People who are unified tend to accomplish more than individuals. The Story of the tower of Babel illustrates this well; indeed so successful were the tower builders that God chose to confuse their language, hence the word babble. The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is the mirror image of this; the Spirit gives to us a unified language whereby we may worship God! It is my belief that the most powerful evangel in this world is a worshipping community... a truly worshipping community! Allow me to quote William Temple's definition of worship to illustrate what I mean:

Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God, it is the quickening of conscience by his holiness, nourishment of mind by his truth, purifying of imagination by his beauty, opening of the heart to his love, submission of will to his purpose. All this gathered up in adoration is the greatest of all expressions of which we are capable.

There were two brothers who I think tapped into this concept of a worshipping community. The hymn writer, Charles and the preacher, John. Together the Wesleys' changed the face of the church and society in England. So much so that the secular historian, Leaky said: "The revolution that destroyed France would have been the Revolution that destroyed England, but for a man by the name of John Wesley." I conclude with the words of Charles Wesley, let us pray:

O Thou who camest from above
The pure celestial fire to impart,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart!

There let it for Thy glory burn
With inextinguishable blaze;
And trembling to its source return,
In humble prayer and fervent praise.

