

Pentecost
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Mark the Evangelist

Ezekiel 37:1 – 14

Psalms 104

Acts 2:1 - 21

John 15:26 – 27; 16:4b-15

[The Spirit] will take what is mine and declare it to you

Pentecost is a day rich in symbolism connected with the giving of life at the creation, the renewal of life in the world, and the transformation of the people of God. At one time Pentecost celebrated the giving of the divine law on Sinai, an occasion when it was said a flame came down from heaven and divided into 70 tongues of fire, one for each nation of the world. All nations could understand, but only Israel promised to keep the law. And Pentecost was a festival of thanksgiving for the harvest, when praise was offered for God's gifts of bounty and grace. At Pentecost the time of waiting was over and of a new stage of life had begun.

These ideas and many others have helped shape the reading from Acts. The image of a strong, rushing wind that rattled the room where the disciples were gathered reflects the Hebrew word for Spirit - ruach: the breath of God that at creation breathed powerfully over the waters of chaos to bring forth order and life, and the animating breath God breathed into the nostrils of the first humans.

There is another play on imagery. When the Spirit descended and everyone heard of the great deeds of God in their own language, fiery tongues expanded into other tongues and despite the barrier of language, Peter's witness was heard and understood. The scene reverses the events at the Tower of Babel when human striving to reach up to God led to a complete breakdown in communication and community amongst the people of earth. By way of contrast in Acts love divine came down to raise up a diverse community of very race and tongue to draw them into the friendship and knowledge of God.

Luke loves a good story, as we do ourselves but where we expect a novel or a narrative to offer us some sense of the inner personal journey, some sense of character development, he doesn't give us any of that. Nor does Luke make any allowance for those who want to know more about the inner workings of this event. His story is unequivocally centred on a community that, apart from having known Jesus, had no resources of its own and was transformed by a power beyond its grasp. The power of God is the main actor in this drama, and the effects of what happened brought hope and life to the disciples. The outcome was not unambiguous: these strange, inscrutable happenings pushed the boundaries of imagination. What Luke makes clear is that the disciples, and the crowd who gathered were party to an occasion when the Apostles found their tongues and began to preach. It was deeply unsettling. The uncontainable disturbing Spirit of God was setting things in motion and it affected people from all nations.

Luke's account of the outpouring of God's Spirit refers to noisy wind, fire, loud talk, buzzing confusion and public debate. Not all eyes and ears recognised the presence of divine life here. As on the day in the Synagogue, years before, when Jesus read from Isaiah and declared the prophet's words had come true, questions were posed; there was puzzlement, anger and scorn. Peter who once denied his faith and, weeping, deserted the one who called him, stood up to speak, filled with the Spirit. A cowardly blusterer was transformed into a forthright proclaimer of Christ. Spirit empowered people were able to hear intelligible proclamation. Surrounded by controversy and unexplainable events, the work of God was revealed. Something new was let loose. The church's witness began to spread into the whole wide world, not by virtue of any superior marketing strategy, or new technological tricks. There was no recourse to Facebook or Twitter. God's enlivening love searched for and apprehended those who gave witness in such a way that others were gathered into the community of Christ.

Although Luke and John treat the coming of the Spirit in a different time frame, there is no difference in the meaning of this gift. The gift and work of the Spirit is inextricably connected with the story of Jesus. At the end of the Gospel reading [v 15] Jesus says: [the Spirit] "*will take what is mine and declare it to you.*" The action of the Spirit does not promise to make all people more aware of their spirituality in a general sense. Rather especially in John, but also in Peter's sermon, the Spirit makes clear the real meaning and purpose of all that Jesus represents. The Spirit continues to bring to bear the truth about God that is manifest in Him. The Spirit functions like a defence counsel who makes a case for Jesus, in spite of and over against the judgements of the world. It is not that Jesus came to judge the world, but when his light shines we begin to comprehend the difference between God's ways and the sort of choices we normally make. After Jesus departs, the Spirit makes it possible for his "Way" to continue. Which means that when the disciples have the energy and insight to teach what Jesus taught, it is the power of the Spirit at work enabling others to understand who he is for all time and all people.

The witness of Pentecost is that the Spirit that is made known through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the creative Spirit of God that brought life into being and continues to sustain the creation. At a time when belief in Jesus is under assault from all directions, not least within the church, Pentecost stands as a witness, that the God of life has turned towards us in love and chosen to deal with us, through him. Some people still take this idea to be an example of drunken stupidity. Others are confused by it. But others find this news to be the word of life.

When you look at the state of the church in the world it is easy to feel we resemble the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision more than the enlivened community in Acts. It is easy to get anxious about the future and wonder what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world today! But Pentecost is not about us, it is about where the power comes from that enables us to live.

It may be that the Holy Spirit already is active, and we are unable to notice its enlivening presence. Or perhaps we are already in dispute with what it is doing. However, our texts leave us in no doubt: when the Spirit works it makes a case for Jesus. He is not just an inspiring memory: he is a promised presence, a source of renewal and life for all people sent from the very heart of God. Being touched by the Spirit will inevitably mean coming to a renewed appreciation of who Jesus is. And it will mean being drawn more deeply into the pattern of God's reconciling love offered to us in him. The gift of the Spirit is not intended to strengthen our self-indulgence, or deepen our obsessions. It breaks all barriers and crosses all boundaries, so that we might be drawn more deeply into the community of God's love, and in that strength, be set free to transcend ourselves.
