

Pentecost Sunday – 28 May 2023

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost came, all the believers were gathered together in one place. 2 Suddenly there was a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there. 4 They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak. 5 There were Jews living in Jerusalem, religious people who had come from every country in the world. 6 When they heard this noise, a large crowd gathered. They were all excited, because all of them heard the believers talking in their own languages. 7 In amazement and wonder they exclaimed, “These people who are talking like this are Galileans! 8 How is it, then, that all of us hear them speaking in our own native languages? 9 We are from Parthia, Media, and Elam; from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia; from Pontus and Asia, 10 from Phrygia and Pamphylia, from Egypt and the regions of Libya near Cyrene. Some of us are from Rome, 11 both Jews and Gentiles converted to Judaism, and some of us are from Crete and Arabia—yet all of us hear them speaking in our own languages about the great things that God has done!” 12 Amazed and confused, they kept asking each other, “What does this mean?” 13 But others made fun of the believers, saying, “These people are drunk!” 14 Then Peter stood up with the other eleven apostles and in a loud voice began to speak to the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, listen to me and let me tell you what this means. 15 These people are not drunk, as you suppose; it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16 Instead, this is what the prophet Joel spoke about:

17 ‘This is what I will do in the last days, God says:

I will pour out my Spirit on everyone.

Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message;

your young men will see visions,

and your old men will have dreams.

18 Yes, even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,

and they will proclaim my message.

19 I will perform miracles in the sky above

and wonders on the earth below.

There will be blood, fire, and thick smoke;

20 the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will turn red as blood,

before the great and glorious Day of the Lord comes.

21 And then, whoever calls out to the Lord for help will be saved.’

John 7:37-39

37 On the last and most important day of the festival Jesus stood up and said in a loud voice, “Whoever is thirsty should come to me, and 38 whoever believes in

me should drink. As the scripture says, ‘Streams of life-giving water will pour out from his side.’” 39 Jesus said this about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were going to receive. At that time the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not been raised to glory.

Focus: **Thirsting for the Holy Spirit**

Function: Help listeners to yearn for the Spirit and seek its guidance.

Today worldwide churches celebrate Pentecost Sunday. The Greek word for Pentecost means “fiftieth,” signifying the 50th day after Passover. In Jewish tradition, it is the festival of Shavuot (or, in English, the feast of Weeks), an agricultural festival celebrating the end of the Spring harvest, and it is the second of the three pilgrimage festivals.

So as the first reading reveals, while Jews and Gentiles converted to Judaism from all over the Roman world came to Jerusalem, joining the local Jews for the festival, they witnessed the extraordinary event. The commotion happened when all of Jesus’s disciples, about 120 in total as mentioned in Acts 1:15, gathered in one house in Jerusalem. There was a loud “noise from the sky, which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ... (and) what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there.”

The noise attracted the Jews and proselytes (Gentiles converted to Judaism) gathered nearby. They were bewildered to find the disciples speaking in each own mother tongue. “These people who are talking like this are Galileans! 8 How is it, then, that all of us hear them speaking in our own native languages?” What’s going on? How is this possible? They wondered.

The passage tells us that “All the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak.” So, we get the picture that these 120 disciples spoke aloud so that all the onlookers heard them clearly speaking in their own mother tongues.

Can you imagine what that is like? What languages were the disciples speaking, I wonder?

Verse 13 states that “others made fun of the believers, saying, “These people are drunk!”” Therefore, it is interesting to note that *there were people* who could not comprehend what the disciples were speaking, hence thought that they were drunk. Why couldn’t *they* understand the message like the rest, I wonder?

If the disciples were speaking different types of native languages, then they were still known languages, and *those people* would have heard before but just couldn’t

understand. So, the description of what *they* heard the disciples had spoken was like drunken gibberish, it is probably how the disciples sounded. It is probable that the disciples were speaking a kind of unknown language – an angelic language that sounded like drunken gibberish, which we now commonly call speaking in tongues. With this understanding, it probably would mean that the people who understood this gibberish were given the spiritual gift to understand the message in their own native languages about the great things that God had done. And it is fair to say *those people* who could not understand the message were not given that spiritual gift.

When Peter stood up to address the crowd, he assured *those people* that the disciples were not drunk. They were sober because it was simply 9 o'clock in the morning, which was time for the morning prayer and no one would have eaten or drank before that, and they had gathered for the prayer.

In addition, we may assume that Peter was speaking in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek – the common language so that everyone could understand his explanation. However, he didn't offer an answer to why *these people* couldn't understand like the rest. Instead, he focussed on delivering the first-ever public sermon of the Church, about the great things that God had done in the outpouring of God's Spirit on them.

Peter cited prophet Joel's prophecy about what God would do in the last days, saying, "I will pour out my Spirit on everyone. Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message; your young men will see visions, and your old men will have dreams. Yes, even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit ..." This prophecy is about God's promise in restoring God's people and their land with the outpour of God's Spirit on them in the last days.

In the previous chapter (Acts 1:5-6), before he ascended to heaven, Jesus urged the disciples, saying, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Then the disciples asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

So, the moment Peter and the other disciples received the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, they were convinced that Joel's prophecy was fulfilled here and now. They were all inspired to speak God's message in God's language, and they were filled with the confidence to stand out to be witnesses for Jesus in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

In other words, God poured out the Holy Spirit to empower the Church to extend Christ's mission to the ends of the earth. The Spirit enabled the disciples to proclaim the gospel message and be understood even in languages they didn't know. And in reading Acts further, we learn that the Spirit continued to work

through the disciples, empowering them to perform wonders and signs and healing miracles, face martyrdom, and so on. Therefore, the work of the Holy Spirit continues through the centuries, and it still actively empowers us today.

What does this mean to us, present-day disciples, especially in relation to today's Gospel reading from John 7, embracing the empowerment of the Spirit?

In today's Gospel reading, during the festival of Tabernacles, when Jesus said, "Whoever is thirsty should come to me," we know very well that he was not talking about people who were physically thirsty. Figuratively speaking, Jesus was talking about the drought within the human spirit — the dryness within and the lacking of the vitality of life and purpose in life, which every person would face at some point in life. This is due to the spiritual thirst or drought where the divine presence or the experience of the divine is absent in one's life.

And in saying, "Whoever believes in me should drink the life-giving water," Jesus assures us that all who follow him in faith will receive the Holy Spirit poured out on them.

Truly, anyone thirsty should get a drink immediately, so likewise, when our spirit is parched, we need to be refreshed and uplifted as soon as possible. So, Jesus is reassuring us here that our parched soul and spirit will be nourished and quenched by the life-giving water he offers, God's Holy Spirit.

Note that the tone of the language used in "Come to me", as in "Whoever is thirsty should come to me," does not mean come once and done, but come continually, and it is imperative. Hence, Jesus wants us to keep coming to him to be quenched, to be filled with the Spirit.

In this cold wintery weather, it would be nice to have a firepit with burning coal or heat beads. Let's say we have one right here in church keeping everyone warm and comfortable. And if I were to pick out one piece of coal and leave it here, another piece there, and so on. Each bead may appear hot and burning, but not for long that it loses its heat and becomes ineffective. But when it is put back into the firepit, it begins to glow again. Likewise, Jesus wants us to keep coming to him to be filled with the Spirit.

And in quenching our spiritual thirst, the Spirit opens our obscured vision to see God's hand in our lives and frees our burdened hearts to experience God's gracious touch.

Indeed, the Spirit leads and guides us in building our relationship with God, to experience God and God's grace in our daily lives. Like the two disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus and whose eyes were opened to recognise the risen Jesus at the breaking of bread, our spirits shall be livened by the Holy Spirit,

too, to have similar fire-burning feelings within as we experience God's enduring presence and grace.

It is noteworthy that in Jesus's open invitation for anyone who is thirsty to come and drink from him the living water, all who come shall receive the Holy Spirit, which will guide them into faith and all truth. In other words, belief and faith in Christ is a gift, from our response to Christ's invitation. Therefore, as we are renewed and revitalized by the Spirit, and we reach out to the community around us, when we meet people whose beliefs differ from what we do or have no belief at all, let us still welcome them as children of God anyway, trusting that the Spirit works and grants faith in ways beyond our comprehension. Let us focus on being the effective vessels of Christ through our actions in extending God's love as we serve and care for them.

The outpouring and empowerment of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples at that very Pentecost yielded remarkable outcomes; about 3000 people were baptised and added to the group that day (2:41). All because the disciples were thirsty for the Spirit and responded actively when the Spirit empowered them.

As for us, we are already given the Spirit as we follow Christ. May we always be thirsty for the Spirit working in and with us. May we respond actively to God's grace of empowering us with the Spirit to extend the mission of Christ to the communities around us. Amen.