

A Sermon for the feast of Pentecost, or Whitsunday

Sunday 31st May 2020, at Saint John's Church in Savannah

... with many other words did [Peter] testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 2:40

Pentecost bursts on the disciples of Jesus with *the sound of a mighty rushing wind* – the power of the storm-wind, the untameable hurricane, terrifying and exhilarating all at once. And then *in tongues of fire* that same power rests on each of the disciples of Jesus, and bursts forth from their mouths in astonishing utterance. It was said (Genesis 11) that all men once spoke the same language, but when in their pride they sought to build a tower to heaven, God *confounded* their language, so that they could not understand one another and left off building the tower. Today the polyglot pilgrim crowd in Jerusalem is also *confounded* when they hear the disciples speaking, but not because they can't understand what they are saying – but because they can. *Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? ... we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.* Babel's diversity of tongues is not undone or reversed, but rather harmonized in a promise of a new and universal community. And that is what Pentecost is all about – the power of God released in utterance among the disciples of Jesus, building the community that sin had destroyed. And the question it raises for us – can it build us into community also?

After power, then utterance: Peter seizes the opportunity to explain this event to the amazed and wondering crowd - pilgrims from afar, but lots of local residents too. What they have just heard and seen, Peter says, is the outpouring of the Spirit foretold by the prophet for the last days, when the purposes of God hasten to fulfilment, in judgment and salvation: *blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke: ... And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.* That's astonishing news to proclaim, but Peter doesn't stop there, he pivots to the recent events in Jerusalem, and bluntly tells them, first, that they are responsible for the death of Jesus just weeks earlier; second, that God has raised him from the dead, and third, that *being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear.* The conclusion is as inescapable as it was unwelcome: *let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made the same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.*

There is a reckoning with the truth going on here that must have been a shock to his hearers, many of whom were complicit in the death of Jesus. But the power working

through Peter's utterance cannot be denied – the power of the storm wind from heaven, the power of spiritual reality breaking in and sweeping away wishful thinking and stubborn prejudice. *Pricked in their heart*, shocked and appalled by what Peter has told them, they turned to him and asked *what shall we do?* Though Peter has been holding their feet to the fire, they sense that he is not moved by malice, but by zeal for the truth – and Peter responds with something more than truth, an offer of grace and mercy: *Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost;* and he urged them, over and over again, *Save yourselves from this untoward generation.* Through the same Jesus they crucified, who as Christ and Lord endured judgment he did not deserve, can they escape the judgment they deserve.

What's going on here? Jesus had been warning his people and their leadership that they were on track for the calamity which did eventually overtake them in the year 70 A. D. To escape this calamity, Jesus called for a radical new direction, embodied in a new community, which God had sent him to establish through the gospel he proclaimed. And though he was rejected and crucified, yet God has vindicated Jesus, and poured out his Spirit on the apostles to continue that mission. The offer remains open: *Save yourselves from this untoward generation.* Peter is offering them forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Spirit, in the community of salvation, with the disciples of the crucified and risen Lord, but it will take repentance and baptism – a radical change of heart, a death to old ways of thought and action – a new way of thinking, a new perspective and direction – a new obedience to his word, grounded by faith in him as Lord and Savior. The power of the Spirit at work in the words of Peter is the power of the truth spoken in love - and where it is received, in repentance and the obedience of faith, a new spiritual community emerges which Luke describes¹ in the final verses, a community in which truth and love cohere.

So what does this say to us today? I need hardly remind you that America is a society under great strain – facing disease, economic hardship, and massive unemployment, bitter polarization at home and abroad, and this week another shocking injustice and another shocking breakdown of public order – *blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke.* It doesn't take a prophet to point out that we can't go on this way indefinitely without calamity - and yet, while we are very good at pointing the finger at each other, we seem incapable of fixing our problems, let alone changing course. Let me remind you that the judgment of the Lord arrives not in thunderbolts from the sky, but in this – that he lets sinners have their way, to the point of self-destruction – like a runaway train hurtling to ruin. If we keep on going in the same direction, sooner or later it is going to end badly.

I don't have a fix for all of America's problems and I don't know who does; but I have the words of the Apostle: *Save yourselves from this untoward generation* - and I have the words of the Prophet: *whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved*. This is not a call to bail out, and go survivalist. In these last days, we need what Jesus and his apostles preached – a radical new direction lived out in the new community built by the power of God's Spirit, through the utterance of his word, by faith in the crucified and risen Lord. What's more, we already have it – in the gospel and the church, in the very community, to which we belong, who at least in outward profession have accepted God's call to salvation in baptism. So it seems we have a part to play. I am not proposing anything grandiose – God knows, even if Episcopalians don't, how utterly insignificant we are in the larger scheme of things, and how little we have to offer the world. But there is something for us to do – something that we perhaps could do - by God's help. We could become what we are. We could be that community into which he has called us, more fully, more deeply, more truly. For the Spirit whose power was released in the utterance of the truth in love – that gift is still Christ's promise to those who believe in him. But it will take repentance – a radical change of heart, of perspective and direction, a death to old ways of thought and action – a new way of thinking, a new perspective and direction – a new and radical obedience to his word. And we might be praying for that. Though it rarely gets the attention it deserves, like Christmas and Easter, Pentecost is a great feast of the Gospel and of the Church, a time of celebration and thankfulness; but it is also most certainly a time of earnest and humble prayer for a new gift of the Holy Ghost. And I would bid you to earnest and humble prayer: *Come Holy Ghost, fill the hearts of thy faithful people, and kindle in them the fire of thy love*.

The Holy Eucharist...

- for the gift of the Spirit to the Church for the proclamation of the Gospel
- for the gift of utterance, to speak the truth of God's word in love, in our witness and in our worship, with one another

11 And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. ² And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. ³ And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. ⁴ And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. ⁵ And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. ⁶ And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. ⁷ Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. ⁸ So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. ⁹ Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

Acts 2

2 And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. ² And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. ³ And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

⁵ And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. ⁶ Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? ⁸ And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? ⁹ Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God. ¹² And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this? ¹³ Others mocking said, These men are full of new wine.

¹⁴ But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, Ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words: ¹⁵ For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel;

¹⁷ And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God,
I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh:
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams:

¹⁸ And on my servants and on my handmaidens
I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy:

¹⁹ And I will shew wonders in heaven above,

and signs in the earth beneath;
blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke:
²⁰ The sun shall be turned into darkness,
and the moon into blood,
before the great and notable day of the Lord come:

²¹ And it shall come to pass,
that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

²² Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: ²³ Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: ²⁴ Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it. ²⁵ For David speaketh concerning him,

I foresaw the Lord always before my face,
for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved:

²⁶ Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad;
moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope:

²⁷ Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell,
neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.

²⁸ Thou hast made known to me the ways of life;
thou shalt make me full of joy with thy countenance.

²⁹ Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day. ³⁰ Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; ³¹ He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption. ³² This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. ³³ Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. ³⁴ For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith himself,

The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand,

³⁵ Until I make thy foes thy footstool.

³⁶ Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made the same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.

³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? ³⁸ Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. ³⁹ For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the LORD our God shall call. ⁴⁰ And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.

⁴¹ Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. ⁴² And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³ And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all that believed were together, and had all things common; ⁴⁵ And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. ⁴⁶ And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, ⁴⁷ Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

John 14

At that time, Jesus said unto his disciples: ¹⁵ If ye love me, keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; ¹⁷ *even* the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. ¹⁹ Yet a little while, and the world seeth me no more; but ye see me: because I live, ye shall live also. ²⁰ At that day ye shall know that I *am* in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you. ²¹ He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him. *

²² Judas saith unto him, not Iscariot, Lord, how is it that thou wilt manifest thyself unto us, and not unto the world?

* ²³ Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. ²⁴ He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me. ²⁵ These things have I spoken unto you, being *yet* present with you. ²⁶ But the Comforter, *which is* the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. ²⁸ Ye have heard how I said unto you, I go away, and come *again* unto you. If ye loved me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father: for my Father is greater than I. ²⁹ And now I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe. ³⁰ Hereafter I will not talk much with you: for the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me. ³¹ But that the world may know that I love the Father; and as the Father gave me commandment, even so I do.

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- ⁱ As Luke describes it, it is a community, that *continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.*
 - one in which the power of God was manifest, where *fear [awe] came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.*
 - a community of open hearts, open hands, and open homes where *all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need –*