

SERMON: 15 May 2016
(Reading: Acts 2:1-13)

WHAT IS THE CONTEXT OF OUR READING?

People often assume that “Pentecost” is an exclusively Christian invention when God’s Holy Spirit was given to his followers. But whoever thinks this is wrong.

In fact Pentecost was a Jewish festival celebrated 50 days after, counting from the second day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread or Passover, i.e., seven weeks after the sixteenth day of Nisan. The Greek word “Pentacosta” means 50. It was one of the three great Jewish festivals in which all the males were required to appear before God in Jerusalem with gifts and offerings. The Pentecost was originally called *Shavu’oth* or translated the Feast of Weeks (Ex 34:22; Dt 16:10) because it occurs seven weeks after Passover. It was a festival of thanks for the harvest, which began directly after the Passover (Deut. 16:9ff.) and was hence also called Day of the Firstfruits (Num. 28:26) because two loaves of newly ground grain were presented before the Lord. The festival was primarily a harvest festival and celebrated the end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest. Traditionally, grain harvest extended from Passover, when the first grain was cut (Dt 16:9) around mid-April, to Pentecost, which marked its conclusion in mid-June.

Each year the priest waved a sheaf of newly harvested grain before the Lord on the day after the Sabbath during the Festival of Unleavened Bread (the period of seven days following Passover). The people then counted 50 days from the offering of that first sheaf of grain until the day after the seventh Sabbath to observe the Feast of Weeks (Lv 23:11). On this day two loaves, made of two-tenths of an ephah of flour and baked with yeast, were waved before the Lord (v 17) and freewill offerings were encouraged (Dt 16:10). This harvest festival was a time of great rejoicing and a holy assembly when no work was to be done (Lv 23:21; Dt 16:11).

The Jewish historian from this period, Josephus tells us that, in his day, great numbers of Jews came from every quarter to Jerusalem to keep this festival.

It was a festive time and all the disciples “were all together in one place.” In all likelihood, this was the same room where they were staying before.

One of the phenomena occurring at Pentecost (2:2–13) is a sound from heaven “like the blowing of a violent wind” (v.2). This is not a literal wind, but something “as of” a wind. Apparently its purpose is to attract attention (v.6).

Another spectacular phenomenon is the “tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them” (v. 3). The precise nature of this phenomenon is not explained, but its purpose is probably to indicate the ability of every believer to witness by the power of the Spirit, since the tongues of fire rest on each one. The tongues of fire

seem to be the fulfillment of John the Baptist's proclamation that the Coming One would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Mt 3:11; Lk 3:16).

Then the disciples started speaking in "tongues" or languages that represented all nations according to Luke's geographical listing of the "God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven" (v. 5), a list puzzling in its selection of nations, ranging roughly east to west in the known world, but impressive in its breadth of representation. Some of these people are "amazed and perplexed" at the disciples (v. 12), while a few others make "fun of them" and accuse them of having "too much wine" (v. 13).

Luke tells us that Jesus' promise came true when He said that He will be with them when they proclaim His Gospel to all people. People from all over the world could now hear the disciples declaring the wonders of God in their own tongues!" No wonder Luke says they were all "Amazed and perplexed".

The people realized the power of God. Do we realise it? Or are we still full of doubts as to what God can do?

Amen

LET US APPLY THE MEANING OF OUR READING!

The text verse for the sermon is verse 4: "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them."

Last week Friday I attended a choir festival/competition at Dalmahoy Episcopal Church. Three Primary School choirs participated and all of them had to sing the song "Bridge over troubled waters" in memory of a local lady who died last week. It was one of her favourite songs.

When I listened to the words, all of a sudden, I interpreted them differently as to what, I suppose, they were originally intended to mean. To me, the song lists what and how the Holy Spirit works in our lives. So let us look at the words of "Bridge over troubled waters..."

All the biblical passages confirm that God left His Holy Spirit as a comforter, someone who will help each and every believer when they are weak, tired, down and lonely. The first verse of the contemporary song says:

When you're weary, feeling small,
When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all;
I'm on your side. When times get rough
And friends just can't be found,
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down.

God's Holy Spirit is indeed a bridge when we have to cross over troubled and muddy waters. We do not have to cross them alone. God will take each and every one of us by the hand and help us over through His Holy Spirit. God loves us. He gave His life for us so that we can walk free of the burdens of sin, death and hell.

So, as verse two of the contemporary song says:

When you're down and out,
When you're on the street,
When evening falls so hard
I will comfort you.
I'll take your part.
When darkness comes
And pain is all around,
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down.

God's Spirit is indeed the comforter, the ONE who will make God's presence in our lives a reality, assuring us that we are never ever alone, on our own. He is the ONE who will form the words on our lips when we cannot utter one syllable to speak to God our Father. He is the ONE who will make any pain or suffering bearable. He is ONE who will take away the darkness and bring the light of God's presence.

And when it is time for us to go to our heavenly Father, He once again will lead us on our final journey. He will be all around us, comforting us and making us ready to receive the everlasting peace from God. So yes, the final verse says it so beautifully...

Sail on silver girl,
Sail on by.
Your time has come to shine.
All your dreams are on their way.
See how they shine.
If you need a friend
I'm sailing right behind.
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind.

You and I have received God's Holy Spirit to proclaim that Jesus is our Lord and Saviour. Jesus offered us peace with God. He gave us His Holy Spirit to help us to know that we are never without His loving care. Whenever we are anxious and full of doubt we can have the assurance – God will come to us too wherever we are. Yes He will come to us in the most unusual places:

- when we hide from others in a dark and closed room,
- when we are anxious and scared,
- when we are feeling hopeless and tired,

- when we are ill and suffering,
- when we worry about tomorrow,
- when we lose all our savings,
- when other people hurt us with their gossip and insensitivity
- when our loved ones die and we are left alone,
- when we cry and cannot stop crying,
- When we struggle to overcome alcohol or drug abuse,
- When we divorce and are left alone,
- When we cannot pray and sing praises to God!

You and I can go in peace this morning out of this Church and rejoice that God is present with us through His Holy Spirit, wherever we are on life's journey. All you and I have to do, is to ask for God to lead us on.

This morning we have been witnesses of God's presence in the lives of the couple who stood before us. He convinced them through His Holy Spirit to join this fellowship and to let their daughter be baptised in His Holy Name.

May God's Holy Spirit fill and enrich your lives so that when your daughter grows up, she will also want to have a relationship with her Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

May we go from here and rejoice because God is the Almighty God and there is nothing that HE cannot do!

Amen