

SERMON – 24 MAY 2015

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 verses for the sermon are verses 12 and 13: “we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.

In our day and time it is shocking to find how many Pentecostal and extreme charismatic followers still believe that God's Holy Spirit is their possession. They make this claim because they can speak in "tongues" as a sign that God's Holy Spirit is on them. This wrong conception often leads to tragedy and division among families who are made to feel that they do not have God's Spirit.

I for one, experienced this with my own uncle who was terminally ill with cancer. He had a neighbour who introduced him to a new pastor in their village. When he met this pastor, he claimed that he will heal my uncle. And when the "healing" did not happen and my uncle's condition worsened, the pastor said that is my uncle's fault. He did not have the Holy Spirit because he did not speak in tongues!

I visited him days before he died and I was shocked to see my uncle in a state of spiritual distress and turmoil. When I asked him, how he is doing, he started crying. Through his tears, he said that he is so worried because he is destined for hell! I struggled to keep my composure. I then said, how can you think such a thing. He then told me of the pastor that told him that he does not have God's Holy Spirit. So my uncle made the very clear conclusion that because he does not have God's Holy Spirit he is not going to see the Kingdom of God.

I then explained to him that we do not have to speak in a different "tongue" or language. God is not daft. He is the Almighty God. He understands all the languages on this earth. He even knows the language of our hearts and our souls. I said to my uncle, it is all about having a relationship with God and when we believe, God is with us through His Holy Spirit. There is not a tick list for us to complete in order to qualify for having God's presence in our lives. Each and every time we confess that Jesus is our ONLY Lord and Saviour, God's Holy Spirit is with us. God gave us His Holy Spirit to proclaim his Gospel of mercy and grace to everyone. My uncle stopped crying and said that he does believe that Jesus is his saviour and Lord. I then said because of his faith, he will see God face to face. He died a few days later in peace because he had the living hope!

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 be truthful witnesses of His resurrected presence. And when we are anxious and full of doubt we can have the assurance – Jesus will also 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 out of this Church this morning in peace and rejoice because nothing can keep us away from the Triune God, the Father, the Son and His Holy Spirit.

I want to conclude in the words of Paul:

“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Amen!