

Living the Miracle of Pentecost

Act 2:1-13

Day of Pentecost: May 31, 2020

Text:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya-- belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

Reflection:

The season of Easter closes today with the Feast of Pentecost. The new season of Pentecost lasts through what we call "Ordinary Time" until the liturgical season of Advent before Christmas. Today we gather to recognize and give thanks to God for the gift of the Spirit to the Church. The gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church at Pentecost guides our response to God's mission throughout this long liturgical season. I pray that in this season of Pentecost the Spirit unites our lives with the lives of the whole people of God.

In Jewish tradition, Pentecost was the celebration of the Feast of Weeks, the spring barley harvest. When the Jews were no longer an agriculture-based society, the rabbis gave the festival a new meaning - a commemoration of the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. One day during the celebration of the festival, something happened to the people gathered in Jerusalem.

Let us hear the story again. On a particular day in Jerusalem, according to the gospel storyteller, Luke, many people had gathered together in one place to celebrate the harvest festival. At that time only a very tiny minority among the Jews were openly followers of Jesus, His disciples and followers are in hiding for fear of further persecution. The memory of the crucifixion of Jesus is still vivid and his disciples are worried about their security. Yet, in their powerless state, they are given the power to speak of the vision of God with authority in public places by speaking "in tongues."

The disciples and other followers do not at first believe themselves to be capable of carrying out their own mission without the presence of Jesus. However, when they open their mouths to speak, they hear themselves sounding like Jesus. They discover abilities within themselves they never knew they had. The Spirit on Pentecost empowers the minorities and the intimidated to speak out loud about the vision of their community in God.

Traditionally, the Pentecost story has often been interpreted as the miracle of “tongues,” that is, the Holy Spirit gives the disciples the power to speak in different languages in order to communicate the mighty works of God. I understand that many people today still think of Pentecost as the gift of speaking in tongues. Particularly the people of the circle of Pentecostal Churches believe that when they speak “in tongues,” they are “born-again Christians,” or “real Christians.” The ability to speak in “other tongues” is an important matter for them - a critical yardstick to judge whether or not they have received the Holy Spirit.

However, there may be another interpretation of this story. Let us listen carefully to today’s scripture. We find the Pentecost story in Acts two, verses six to eight. Let us listen to it with new ears, from a new and different perspective.

And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? (Acts 2:6-8)

In the story the multitudes know that the disciples are speaking in Galilean, and yet they can understand them in their own languages! People speak in their own tongues, but at the same time they are understood by others in the first language of the listener. For example, it is as if I spoke to you in Korean and you understood my Korean in your mother tongue, English or Mandarin or Japanese without translation. Or, as if you spoke to me in French and I understood it in Korean even though I don’t know French at all. Now, here are important questions. Does God then abolish the different cultures and languages? Is this a miracle of tongues? Or is it a miracle of ears, in other words, a miracle of listening?

The Pentecost story is about how the Holy Spirit lives and works in particular languages and cultures not by ignoring them but by identifying and affirming them. The Holy Spirit celebrates all cultural differences, thus transcending them. Pentecost is a realization of the vision of how we live together beyond our differences. Pentecost is the very experience of becoming intercultural church. The Pentecost story testifies *how* God lives among us: God embraces and affirms our differences - speaking to each of us in our own language: for me, God often speaks to me in Korean. Thus God affirms all our identities and cultures. We are invited to listen carefully to what God is saying to us. This is the miracle of listening.

In this culturally and religiously diverse world where many languages are spoken, many cultures celebrated and many religions practised, God offers us an authentic human community in which to live together in respect and dignity. Through ordinary human speech, the Holy Spirit establishes unity amid diversity to take to heart the common good.

The Day of Pentecost is often called “the birthday of the church.” The day the Holy Spirit comes to strengthen the community of faith by celebrating all our different languages, cultures and religions to build a genuine human community reflecting God’s vision for us.

Today we are invited to come to the table of Jesus where we are all affirmed and cherished in our own identities. As we eat and drink in the spirit of Jesus, we become one with Christ and with one another around the world and throughout the ages. Come! Let us listen to one another. We are all welcome!

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