

Day of Pentecost – Christopher Byaruhanga

Acts 2:1-21

Good morning, beloved saints of St. Paul’s Free Methodist Church! Today is the Day of Pentecost. It is the day we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit in a dramatic way. It is the birthday of the Christian church. We are told that the Lord ascended into heaven and was taken from the apostles’ sight at Bethany. After Jesus was taken from their sight, the disciples returned to Jerusalem to wait there for the promise of the Father. This was because earlier they had heard Jesus say: *But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.* (John 16:12-14)

Jesus had also told his disciples that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them; and that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. But this was a promise that lacked details. The disciples must have wondered, “When will the Holy Spirit show up? What will it look like? What kind of power are we likely to get?” And so the disciples stayed in Jerusalem as they had been instructed, doing only one activity—namely, praying. Sometimes, when we don’t know the answer to the equation, the best thing we can do to find some peace is to devote ourselves to prayer. That is exactly what the disciples did. They devoted themselves to prayer.

You will realize that before the Day of Pentecost, there was no such a thing that we would call a church. There was only a small group of devoted and frightened followers of Jesus, who had no direction and no power in their message. But that was soon to change.

What is this story of Pentecost? In the Law of Moses Pentecost was called the Feast of Harvest, and later it was called the Feast of Weeks. This was the second of the three great pilgrimage feasts of the Jewish liturgical calendar. By the time of Jesus, the holiday had taken on the more festive tone of a communal meal to which the poor were invited. On this same day, 50 days after Jesus’ resurrection, it was Pentecost and Jerusalem was filled with many people. It was the perfect day for the Holy Spirit to come and so here was the miracle of Pentecost.

The miracle of Pentecost affected people’s ears. They heard a noise that could only be described as a hurricane from heaven. The Holy Spirit also affected their eyes. It came upon them, sounding like a mighty wind and appearing like flames of fire. I want us to take note of the two qualifications: the sound was like a violent wind (but there was no wind, just the sound of one), and what they saw were *tongues as of fire* (it was not fire, but it looked like fire).

Something also happened to the part of the brain that controls speech. We are told that, all of a sudden, they miraculously began to speak in foreign languages, attracting the attention of foreign Jews who were amazed to hear their native languages spoken by Galileans as the Spirit enabled them. How challenging this event is to a language group that does not deal with much linguistic diversity! The slightest hint of linguistic difference tends to irritate such a group of people, that expects everyone to know and speak the majority language, and in an accent they can

comprehend. This would not be a problem with a person like me from Uganda, a country which has more than 30 written languages and 30 different accents.

I want us to note again the difference between the first two experiences of wind and fire and the experience of speaking in foreign languages. In this foreign language experience, we are not told that they spoke what was like another language or what seemed to be another language. They spoke other languages. So what is being described is a true miracle: a person speaking intelligibly a language he or she has never learned. The point of emphasis here is that people were there from various language groups.

The coming of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus had said, would extend the gift of salvation to the whole world. And so the Spirit descended when the whole world was present to receive the good news. When God called Abraham, He promised him that the whole world would be blessed through him; with time this promise of God's grace and salvation was largely confined to the people of Israel. But again and again Israel was reminded that God had not forgotten the rest of the world, and that the day would come when the nations of the world would hear his voice and believe. Pentecost is the moment when that became possible. Pentecost made the church the means of God's grace to the world.

The church exists to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. Every Sunday Christians gather to tell their story about what Christ has done in their lives. One of the biggest fears of church in countries that are moving beyond Christendom is speaking to strangers about Jesus. In my country it is common to be asked by someone unknown to you whether you know Christ. And if you say yes, he or she would want you to tell your story about your encounter with Jesus. If you say no, then that is a rare opportunity for that person to tell you his or her story.

There are two lessons to be learned from the Pentecost experience. 1) Pentecost portrays God's interest in the salvation of the world. The multitudes that gathered in Jerusalem from all the countries roundabout gathered to celebrate a Jewish feast. But the important thing about these people was not that they were Jews, but that they had come from and would return to so many different countries where so many languages were spoken. According to St. Luke these were *devout Jews from every nation under heaven*. Luke regards them as representing the whole world. The disciples must have remembered Jesus' words when he said, *When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself*.

What truly amazed the people was the miracle of speech that the disciples had. They knew these were ordinary men, uneducated men from an uneducated part of the Holy Land. They were from Galilee. But for one brief moment of time the divisions in humanity expressed through language difference were overcome, and people from all over the world were hearing the good news in their own languages. They could have heard the Gospel in a translated form, but instead on that day God in his wisdom undid what he had done during the tower of Babel experience. Why? Because He wanted them to hear the gospel in their own languages.

When God wants people to hear the gospel in their own language He uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Look at it this way: wasn't this the same Peter who heard Jesus say to him, *Get behind me, Satan?* Yes, he was. Wasn't this the same Peter who had recently denied even

knowing Jesus three times? Yes, he was. Wasn't this the same Peter who was in hiding for the last 50 days afraid of being arrested for being a follower of Jesus? Yes, he was. Now here is Peter, boldly proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ right in the face of those people who would later persecute him.

Inspired by this same Holy Spirit, Peter addressed the crowd in a loud voice. This was a fulfillment of a prophecy made by Joel. Joel said: *In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams.* We see a much different Peter from seven weeks ago. Seven weeks ago, Peter was ashamed of Jesus. Now we see a different Peter who is not ashamed of talking about Jesus Christ. What is the difference? The difference is that here we see a Peter who has received the power of the Holy Spirit. It is not that all of a sudden Peter had become charismatic, or some great public speaker. Rather, it was God, in the Person of the Holy Spirit, speaking through Peter.

2) The second lesson is that Pentecost illustrates the power of the Spirit to open our hearts to the truth about Jesus Christ. In the reading this morning we only heard a portion of the full story of the Day of Pentecost. But already the point has been made in verse 11. The foreigners who heard the disciples speaking in their own languages understood the gist of the message, namely, God had performed mighty works in Jesus of Nazareth.

Peter's sermon, and dialogue with the crowd, ends with the wonderful news that about 3000 were added to their number that day. The Bible does not tell us about any other occasion when Peter ever preached a sermon again that resulted in such a big number getting converted. Certainly again and again Peter must have preached, and explained the gospel to people, and many must have believed—but not to that number. We find that people who shouldn't have believed, people who had no intention of believing in Jesus Christ, people who had never heard of Jesus Christ before, people who had to that point been hostile to the Christian message believed in Jesus. The Gospel itself is a miracle: wealthy, comfortable, sophisticated people in the great cities of the world and uneducated peasants in many parts of the world, including my own country, have believed in Jesus Christ whenever his story has been told. The surprising thing is that most of them do not bother to explain why. They simply know that what they have heard is true: they are sinners, guilty before God, and Jesus is the only one who can make sinners stand justified before God. This was the same experience Peter's congregation had. It was the Holy Spirit who convinced them to accept the Gospel.

From that point on the apostles and then other Christians explained the gospel. As Christians we need to appreciate the fact that there is nothing like this in other religions, where the message of divine love for human beings is spread by those who have discovered that love for themselves—that God's love is for everyone, that He has always desired the salvation of all humankind, that He never intended any other result but that his people should be drawn from every language group and nation on the earth. This vision is unique to Christianity. So is the idea that He would save unworthy people from their sins so that the forgiven sinners might then become the means of his salvation. And so, brothers and sisters in the Lord, the love of others, the salvation of others, a deep desire for the blessing and happiness of others rest in the heart of both the history and the message of our faith, and our faith alone.

It is in this unique and wonderful context that Pentecost finds its great meaning as one of the few defining moments in the history of the world. And so what is our calling as Christians who are in a very different age and place, who are in a very different church? Our calling is to present Christ Jesus to the world in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the world may believe that he is the Lord. Amen.