

5 June 2022

Acts 2:1-21
Romans 8:14-17
John 14:8-17

A clergy colleague once told me of how a student at theological college cheekily and creatively ducked the challenge of reading a list of unfamiliar and difficult names in a Bible reading he had to deliver in front of the faculty. Translating the student's method to the Acts 2 passage in front of us today, we would have heard:

“Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, and a whole bunch of other ethnicities – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

It would be so much easier, wouldn't it!

“Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs...”

and our minds reel at all the detail and the challenge of processing this list that includes some places we think are familiar and others of which we have no knowledge.

And perhaps the very idea of Pentecost carries something of the same kind of challenge. On the one hand it seems very familiar: after all, we celebrate this important festival in our church every year, seven weeks after Easter. But on the other hand we may feel we have little idea, because this Acts 2 tale seems so far from our experience or because the very word “Pentecost” evokes practices and experiences that we've rejected or which have caused pain or suspicion or division. (One of the sadnesses in my own experience is of hurt done to a family member due to a church leader's insistence that a particular gift of the Spirit was the distinguishing mark of true faith.)

As an article on the subject in this month's *Messenger* reminds us, Pentecost finds its roots in the practices of the people of the Old Testament. For a first-century Jew,

Pentecost was the fiftieth day after Passover. It was an agricultural festival. It was the day when farmers brought the first sheaf of the wheat from the crop, and offered it to God, partly as a sign of gratitude and partly as a prayer that all the rest of the crop too, would be safely gathered in. But, for the Jew, neither Passover nor Pentecost were simply agricultural festivals. These festivals awakened echoes of the great story which dominated the long memories of the Jewish people, the story of the Exodus from Egypt, when God fulfilled his promises to Abraham by rescuing his people. Passover was the time when the lambs were sacrificed, and the Israelites were saved from the avenging angel who slew the firstborn of the Egyptians. Off went the Israelites that very night, and passed through the Red Sea into the Sinai desert. Then, 50 days after Passover, they came to Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Law. Pentecost, the fiftieth day, isn't then just about the 'first fruits', the sheaf which says the harvest has begun. *It's about God giving to his redeemed people the way of life by which they must now carry out his purposes.*¹

So it is deeply significant that God should choose this day to pour out his Spirit, this day when Jews from all over the gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate this Pentecost festival which is so pregnant with meaning and expectation. We see again the first fruits of the harvest, now in the apostles filled with the Spirit and going on to bear powerful witness to Jesus and his resurrection and to win converts from the very first day. This is like the offering the sheaf as the sign of the great harvest to come. We see again the giving of the Law, this time in Jesus ascending into heaven and coming down again, in the person of the Spirit, not with a written law carved on tablets of stone, but with the dynamic energy of the law, designed to be written on human hearts.²

The Spirit is poured out with dramatic signs of wind and fire, signs of power, creative force, and new life.

And the other strange manifestation of the Spirit's outpouring on those assembled is that they suddenly start speaking in other languages, "as the Spirit gave them words to say". There is much that can be said about the phenomenon itself – both in the

¹ Wright, *Acts*, p.21. (Emphasis added)

² Wright, *Acts*, p.22, with some adaptation

time of the apostles and in the church today (and it is sad and deeply ironic that it remains an area of division). However, today I want to focus more on what this ability to speak in other languages *meant*. And we get a clue to that if we pay attention to the account given in Acts 2.

“Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? We are Parthians and a whole bunch of other ethnicities – yet we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

What is heard in all the different languages is not just random speech, the simple conventions of small talk, observations about the weather, or deep discussion about the issues of the day. What is heard are declarations of the *wonders of God*.

As Acts 1 records it, at the time that the risen Jesus was about to ascend to heaven the apostles asked him “Lord, is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” The big issue was of how God would fulfil his ancient promise to restore his kingdom, his saving, sovereign rule. And, if the apostles really thought about it, they would recall that God’s rule was not just a matter for Israel’s benefit. Rather, the promise had always been the restoration of God’s sovereign rule to Israel, and *through Israel* to the rest of the world. The challenge was to see how God was going to fulfil what he had said long ago to Abraham, “In you, and in your family, all the families of the earth will be blessed.”^{3,4}

The promise to Abraham in Genesis comes directly after the dramatic story in which the people of Babel are building a tower, thinking arrogantly that they can make a name for themselves.⁵ God’s response is to confuse their languages so that they cannot understand one another and cannot therefore work together on creating a human society which would have not need of the creator God.⁶

“Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs...”

³ Genesis 12:3

⁴ Wright, *Acts*, p.28

⁵ Genesis 11:1-9

⁶ Wright, *Acts*, p.28

What we have here is broad sweep around the Mediterranean, from north and south, east and west. There is not just one speaker giving this list: the Acts account is the aggregate summary sense of what many people are saying. So the point is not about giving a precise list of the nationalities of everyone there; it is much more about an impression of a great diverse company of people from across the world as it was known to the inhabitants of Jerusalem at that time. The list represents *all the world*. So then, with the day of Pentecost the curse of Babel is overturned: the diversity of humanity represented in their multiple languages remains; but the divisive effects are overcome by the Spirit's gift of communication. Babel is overturned; in other words, God is dramatically signalling that his promises to Abraham are being fulfilled, and the *whole human race* is going to be addressed with the good news of what has happened in and through Jesus.⁷

"Parthians, and a whole bunch of other ethnicities..." The specific details of the list seem unimportant to us, obscured by the mists of the time and distance between us and those Mediterranean cultures from so long ago. But in other ways the specificity is really important. It is a reminder that with the coming of the Spirit the work of God is placed within every human culture.

So why is that important?

It is important for two related reasons.

The first reason goes directly back to what I've just been talking about. The Spirit places the work of God within each culture so that the *whole world*, the *whole human race*, can be blessed. That's the goal; God's purpose from the beginning.

And the second reason moves from the goal to the method. The Spirit places the work of God within each culture so that every culture has its native witnesses, those who will, within their culture and language, express in word and deed the wonders of God.

Just as the first Pentecost was about God giving to his redeemed people a way of life by which they must carry out God's purposes, so too the new Pentecost equips

⁷ Wright, *Acts*, p.29; see also Kuhn. Mayfield offers another perspective, urging us to resist the tendency to read Babel from a Pentecost perspective. Mayfield's key point of application is to see God's desire for and delight in diversity.

the redeemed people of God with what they need to carry out God's purposes in the world.

Our potential baggage and confusion over the meaning of Pentecost may also spill over into our understanding of the nature of the Holy Spirit. There can be a tendency to associate the Holy Spirit only with the strange and spectacular – and for some, and for some denominations, these phenomena are seen as good and as of supreme importance, while for others these things are so strange that they don't fit and have to be downplayed in some way or discounted entirely. The words of Jesus to his disciples in John 14 provide us with some help – albeit only once we get past the hurdle of an unfamiliar Greek word with multiple layers of meaning.

When Jesus says “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another [something or someone] to help you and be with you forever – the Spirit of truth”⁸, the something or someone promised is the *paraclete*. The difficulty lies in locating the meaning of the word *paraclete*, and different bible versions provide different translations, each of which grasps something of the layers.

One word is “helper”. The Holy Spirit is sent by God to lend assistance to God's people, to give them strength and energy to do what they need to do (which is to live for God and to bear witness to his love in the world).⁹

Another word is “comforter”. Like a great many words, this one easily gets diluted into something much less than it could be – diluted merely to something that makes us feel better because we are protected or withdrawn from the world's troubles. At its best, it carries the sense of one who *fortifies* us, one who strengthens us to carry on in the midst of the troubles, doing what we need to do.¹⁰

The last word is “advocate”. This comes from legal language, where an advocate stands before a judge in a court and pleads the client's case. In the heavenly law court, with God as judge, the people of God can have complete confidence that their plight will be constantly and faithfully presented.¹¹

⁸ John 14:16-17

⁹ Wright, *John* .p.62

¹⁰ Wright, *John*, p.62

¹¹ Wright, *John*, p.63

And we do well to remember that the promise of the Spirit in John 14 is an outworking of the mutual love of God the Father for Jesus the Son, the Son for the Father, and them both for the world.¹²

Why does all this matter? Why do we need the Spirit's equipping – in both its spectacular and its more mundane or gentle forms?

Well it matters because we, the Church, the adopted family of God, are now responsible for continuing Christ's work in the world, taking that work into every culture and language and situation that there is.

On the day of Pentecost, the newly Spirit-filled disciples were declaring the wonders of God. This too resonates with John 14, where Jesus tells his disciples "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these."¹³ What an extraordinary promise!

"Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it" Jesus says.¹⁴ This isn't meant in a formulaic way, as if any prayer tagged with the words "in Jesus name" becomes like some magic incantation. To pray "in the name of Jesus" means that we are working as his representatives for his purposes and for his glory. It is in this sense that we are promised that prayers in his name will be answered, because it is here that he is at work in and through us.¹⁵ In the same sense, at the conclusion of each Sunday's worship, we are sent out into the world and we declare that we "go in the name of Christ". We go in all the diversity of our cultures and every other thing that might distinguish us from one another; we go to all the diversity of the world; we go empowered and equipped by the Holy Spirit; we go telling of and displaying and enacting the wonders of God; we go into the world that God is calling and drawing to himself in his great and everlasting love.

¹² John 14:10-11, 15-16. See Hall, and Stamper.

¹³ John 14:12

¹⁴ John 14:13

¹⁵ Wright, *John*, pp.63-64

Sources:

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