

Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2020

This Day of Gathering!

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 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? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

As this day of Pentecost was approaching, my mind was drawn to the first sentence of Acts 2, the story of the Church's birth: *and they were all together in one place.* This

is *not* Pentecost as we would prefer it, and it seems heavily ironic that we celebrate in this way, for Pentecost is about gathering together. The ancient Jewish feast of Pentecost was a harvest festival of the gathering of the first crops, and it was a prophecy of a greater ingathering to come. It is, though *we* are not gathered, all about gathering. The disciples were gathered together, soon the crowds would gather as one, then a Church would be gathered, and God is still working on a great gathering. So, what does this have to do with us today, scattered as we are? Let us gather our thoughts!

The account of Pentecost begins with the disciples obeying Christ's recent commands. Before his ascension they were told to remain in Jerusalem and to wait for power from on high, and this was not to be a long wait! They gathered, deliberated, and then did a lot of praying, for they had a strong anticipation of something big. Then came the day of Pentecost and the sound of a mighty wind. Luke is careful to explain that this wind filled the room, engulfing all present. If there was a sense that God's Spirit of power was moving among us here at St. Luke's we would probably look around, convinced that God was at work in *other* people and never ourselves. God's Spirit is at work in believers and we must stop denying and start embracing this wonderful promise of power. No one could evade the Spirit's reach and filling on that great day! There was no escape.

Wind and fire are symbols which would have meant a great deal to the disciples. Fire was often the sign of God's presence. Remember the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses, and the cloud of fire which led wandering Israel by night? Wind was also a sign of the Spirit of God. Wind was undeniably real and powerful, yet unseen, which is a wonderful portrayal of our God's presence and strength. The words wind, air and breath were all the same in Hebrew and Greek, and wind also meant life. To breathe is to have life, and to not breathe is to perish. God's Spirit is what makes us alive to God, and to not have God's Spirit is to be dead to God. Now this promised Spirit and power had come! Luke goes on to explain the tongues of fire which fell upon each person there. As they received these tongues of fire they suddenly began to speak in other languages—the many languages of the pilgrims who had gathered at Jerusalem for the feast. There was no need for a further command, for all knew what they were to do. If they had received the gift of speaking another language it could only mean that the message of Jesus needed to be passed on immediately. Rushing out of the room where they were staying, they spoke boldly to the crowds and were noticed without delay.

The day began with the disciples gathered, and now it was time for another gathering. These people, Jews of the diaspora from so many nations, all heard the Good News spoken in a language they understood. The miracle and amazement of all this may be a little difficult for us to grasp. In our minds we think of those Jews all gathered in Jerusalem as being the same. In the Bible dramas we have seen on stage or television, they all seem to be wearing the same kinds of bath robes and all looked much the

same. And wouldn't most Jews be all the same? Not so. There were many differing subcultures of the Jewish nation represented. There were residents of urban Jerusalem, those from rural surrounding Judea, and also Galileans from the northern frontiers of Israel. They spoke basically the same language, but then it got interesting. There were also many Jews from the diaspora, the scattering of Jews around the ancient world. These were Jews living in other nations, speaking other languages and probably dressed in the garb of those nations. Perhaps they knew a little Hebrew, but they were no longer fluent in the language of Israel. They may not have looked or sounded like Jerusalem Jews, but they were truly Jews. Each festival celebration that they visited was probably full of communication difficulties as they strained to understand the language of that land, and to find other pilgrims who might know their own language. But suddenly *all* could hear and understand clearly. How could this be? This was strange. It was frightening.

First came their amazement. How is this happening? The miracle was not unnoticed! It was no minor sign, and it appears that the initial amazement was over the sign itself. The miracle caused deep anguish among the majority, for it was so strangely inexplicable. What power was afoot? And then there were the deniers, with an easy explanation to disarm the tension. "These men are drunks!" The implication was that the crowds must have been imagining hearing their own languages and dialects as the intoxicated disciples babbled on. This is not a particularly credible explanation, but there can be a great comfort in explaining away God's presence and power. Has God done mighty works in your life which you insist upon attributing to luck or chance? Look again, and don't be afraid. God is at work, and our lives are in his powerful hands.

The miracle was quickly recognized, and then followed the natural question: "What does all this mean?" Peter, now empowered to lead and ready to take his place as head apostle, jumped to the head of the crowd to tell them exactly what it all meant. Note how he addressed the whole crowd and not only those who appeared sympathetic, for he also spoke to the cynics and deniers and pleaded for their attention. His sermon began with a reference to the prophet Joel who told of a *last days* which was to come. God's Spirit would be poured out, not only on the prophets and seers, but upon all people, of high and low birth, rich and poor, slave and free, men and women! *All flesh* would receive the Spirit! And so the Spirit was obviously at work. The last days had come.

Last days is a term most often heard as an introduction to a prediction of the immanent end of the world, but this is misleading. Last days can best be described as the final phase of human history. The Bible tells us of many phases in the history of God's saving work. We remember the age of the patriarchs beginning with Abraham, the captivity in Egypt, the exodus, the period of the judges and more chapters to come. All was working toward God's final work of salvation, the sending of the Savior, Jesus Christ the Son of God. Jesus came, told us of the Kingdom, died for our sins, rose in

victory and ascended to heaven. Now there was only one phase of our history remaining. Christ is to gather the Church. We are now in the last days, which concludes with Jesus return *to judge the living and the dead*. The great gathering was now beginning. Up to then God was working primarily through the Chosen People, the Jews, but soon the message of life with God in Christ was to go to all peoples. Were the Jews no longer the Chosen People? They are still very much special in God's eyes as they became the bearers of the Good News to the nations of the earth.

Perhaps you are feeling a little lost and bewildered by the message of Joel, but if so, fear not. There are prophecies of other miraculous signs in the heavens and on earth which seem to point to days of tumult just before Christ's return. Those we still await, but in the meantime, there is the central and glorious message of it all: *And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*. This is the Good News and the Church is about to be gathered as that glad news goes out. This was a gathering which began nearly 2,000 years ago. The word has reached us and continues to spread as the Lord gathers His own in preparation for the Day of the Lord.

When we think about gathering, our own personal longings loom large. We want to be away from the lockdown to see each other face to face, though perhaps masked faces for the while. Let us rejoice in this longing soon to be fulfilled, but let us lift our eyes to a higher goal. People from all around the world remain to be gathered to the family of God. Can we pray for the expansion of the Church, especially where there is persecution and suffering? Can we become more alert to those around us who need to hear the Good News, even those who may seem hostile to all matters of faith? Peter did not turn his back on those who mocked him. Let us show the same kind of magnanimity to those who denigrate the Church. Let us be much quicker to invite and to share our hope.

Today we do not gather, at least just yet. From our own temporary diaspora, we look back to that gathering in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, and look ahead to a gathering to come. The same Spirit is calling, to us and to people of every tongue and tribe. Let us do all we can for the harvest, look ahead with joyful expectation to the gathering!

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Worship Aids

A Hymn

Jesus, With Thy Church Abide

*Jesus, with thy Church abide,
Be her Savior, Lord and Guide,
While on earth her faith is tried:
We beseech Thee, hear us.*

*Keep her life and doctrine pure,
Help her, patient to endure,
Trusting in Thy promise sure:
We beseech Thee, hear us.*

*All her fetter'd pow'rs release,
Bid her strife and envy cease,
Grant the heav'nly gift of peace:
We beseech Thee, hear us.*

*May she one in doctrine be,
One in truth and charity,
Winning all to faith in Thee:
We beseech Thee, hear us. Amen.*
—Thomas B. Pollack

Confession & Words of Assurance: (Acts 2:37-38)

On that day of Pentecost, the Spirit pierced the hearts of the crowd. *The people said to Peter, "Brother, what shall we do?"* Peter said to the crowd, and to us, *Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.*

Let us present ourselves to God in humble confession.

O Lord, who has mercy upon all, take away from us our sins, and mercifully kindle in us the fire of Your Holy Spirit. Take away from us our hearts of stone, and give us hearts of flesh, hearts to love and adore You, hearts to delight in You, to follow and to enjoy You, for Christ's sake.

Repentant sinners, hear the Good News. Peter spoke confidently of forgiveness through Christ, and he added a promise: *And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* Rejoice in your forgiveness, and be made new by Christ's life-giving spirit!

Prayer:

Lord God, we praise You for the gift of Your Holy Spirit, whom You poured upon fearful men and women to make them bold witnesses of the mighty acts You accomplished through Your holy Son, Jesus the Christ.

Give us the power of Your Spirit that we may serve You without fear. Regenerate us by Your Spirit that we may live each day as new persons in Christ. Fill us with Your Spirit that we may reach out in love to all people. Work in us with Your Spirit that we may always do Your will. Help us to

see our baptism as the seal of the Spirit and the pledge of greater gifts to come.

By Your gracious gift of faith enable us to walk in the Spirit and to live in hope. Seal us in Spirit that we may be Yours eternally.

We pray through Him who promised that You would send the Spirit in His name. Amen.

—The Lutheran Book of Prayer

Benediction:

The blessing of the Lord rest and remain upon all his people, in every land and of every tongue;

The Lord meet in mercy all who seek him;

The Lord comfort all who suffer and mourn;

The Lord hasten his coming, and give us his people peace by all means.

—Handley C. G. Moule