

## ACTS 2. 1-21    Pentecost    9.6.19    Ascension

In Genesis 3, before they ate themselves out of house and home, Adam and Eve sought to seize for themselves knowledge that properly belonged to God alone. When shown out Eden's gate, Adam remarked to Eve, "My Dear, we are living in an age of transition." In Genesis 9, God made covenant with Noah "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." But, in Genesis 11, the people of Babel/Babylon thought the same as Adam: they wanted to get as near to heaven as possible, to build high and huddle together and grab a bit of fame and glory. They needed to build the highest of high towers or they felt that they would be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth. This was a defiance of God's mandate to spread out to fill the whole earth.

The tower was a great human achievement, a monument to the peoples' proud self-worth and self-glorification, rather than to Protector God. The sillies had cried "What need we of God now? Look at our building prowess. Now, we can replace God's place in our lives with ourselves."

The builders were marvel crafts-persons. The tower grew so high that it took a workman a whole year to climb to the top with a large brick. The building became an icon; it mattered more than the builder. Without CFEMU support, the workers became isolated, and the human factor became forgotten. Thus, if a tired labourer bringing up a brick, toppled from the dizzy height, the builders mourned more for the loss of the brick than for the loss of the man. So, God descended to confuse the workers' speech with multiple languages. The workers lost the ability to communicate with one another. The human family became strangers, a broken family divided by language and custom. Their intent to build being thwarted, the workers downed tools, left off building and Babel came to nothing. In the story, the very separation that the Babel-ites had built to stop, actually happened. Because they could no longer understand or work together, the tower remained unfinished forever. The real truth of the Babel story was that persecutions, invasions, deportations into exile had dispersed the Chosen People across the then known multi-lingual world, where they became multi-lingual, which rendered them strangers to the faith of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The bible story-writer cobbled this story, *repeat story*, to warn us that communication was of utmost importance if humans are to live in harmony on earth. There can be no unity leading to peace if we are unable to speak to one another in a language that we can understand, in the local human family and in the world-wide family of nations.

Many centuries later, fifty days after the Crucifixion, during the Pentecost harvest, the Holy Spirit of Jesus descended upon, first, the jelly-livered believers, and then on an international audience of pilgrims, the polyglot crowd, crying "You are no longer strangers, scattered no more! The tragedy of Babel's speech impediment has been reversed by the coming of God's own words." Pentecost was not only the birthday of the Church; it was the birth of our being Church.

Now, all the pilgrim peoples, separated so long by language, could hear the Gospel message in their own tongue. The Holy Spirit gave marvellous multiple language ability to the disciples. This ability was a miraculous attention-getter for the cosmopolitan crowd. All the nationalities represented recognized their own languages as more than miraculous multilingualism spoken. The throngs of pilgrim people saw the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. There was an instant worldwide harvest of new believers. God still works all kinds of miracles to

spread the Good News, using many languages as God calls all kinds of people to become followers. No matter what race, nationality or language, God has no favourites, God speaks to us all. Are we listening?

Why did tongues of fire descend upon the believers? Tongues symbolized speech and the communication of the Good News. Fire symbolized God's purifying presence, to burn away the undesirable elements of our lives and set our hearts aflame to ignite all others in love, to melt into unity all false pride in race and culture. Once before, God had sent down fire from heaven on Mount Sinai to confirm the validity of Old Testament Law. At Pentecost, the unchangeable God repeated the firestorm to validate the Holy Spirit's ministry. On Mount Sinai, fire descended in one place; at Pentecost, fire came down on every believer, to symbolize that God's powerful presence is available to all who believe. God may still use dramatic methods of roaring winds and fire to activate our lives, or God's message may come as a gentle whisper. We must wait patiently and always listen.

When the gathered crowd recognized that something supernatural was taking place, they wanted an explanation. Peter raised his voice to remind the hearers, that what they were witnessing was the birth of the historic Old Testament promises from the time of Joel, of the promised pouring out on all flesh of the Holy Spirit with power, power to prophesy, power to see visions, power to dream dreams. And, the result was: "everyone who now calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How are we travelling? Do we live in such a way that people see Christ living in us? Do we shine and sparkle and glow like a city on a hill, to show others what Christ is like in a world that can be crooked and perverse? Are our lives tasteful salt, a seasoning that brings out the best flavour in all? If we Christians make little effort to affect the world around us, if we remain quiet when we should speak, if we go along with the crowd and deny our light and ignore the needs of others, we are of little value to God.

At once, a great change rippled over the crowd. Total strangers, united by the Word of God, came together to find they were relatives, and hope dawned for the family of humankind. The Holy Spirit cried "For too long, you have been strangers. For too long, you have gone your separate ways. For too long, you have allowed the faith that should have unified you, to keep you apart. For too long, you have looked at one another with suspicious and frightened eyes. For too long, you have been unwilling to forget past hurts, to forgive and to join hands in friendship, and to kneel in humility and penitence at the feet of our common Lord and Master."

We may ask why our rising generation, who find wonderful fellowship and sisterhood in kindred pursuits, will not darken the church door, because our presentation of the inclusive Gospel, that claims to unify and energize, still divides. If we do not communicate our religion in a manner they can comprehend and appropriate, if they do not hear what we are striving to say, we may all too easily rebuild Babel in this land of the Holy Spirit.

Remember how this lovely dream began in a little occupied country, filled with the thundering tramp of Caesar's legions. It was a dream shared by a handful of ordinary women and men, who believed in a spiritual message taught them by a village carpenter. Pentecost swept up the dead bones of that first little Jerusalem community, so that it came alive; it stood up; it went forward to the ends of the earth with the Good News of the Risen Christ. The tension under which they lived is still in our world, two violently antagonistic worlds, Rome's and Christ's. It was the little flock which survived. Where are you?