

ACTS 2:1-21 ST JOHN'S, 20.5.18, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

When the day of Pentecost arrived (v 1): this was the middle of three annual Jewish harvest festivals. It was called either the Feast of Harvest, because it celebrated the completion of the grain harvest, or the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, because it took place seven weeks or 50 days after Passover, which was when the grain harvesting began (*πεντηκοστος* means 'fifty').

For Christians, Pentecost commemorates the coming of the Holy Spirit, and we celebrate it 50 days after we celebrate the Resurrection. We sometimes think of Pentecost as the birthday of the church, and as the reversal of the curse of Babel, when human languages were confused and nations scattered.

Today, I want us to concentrate on the events of the Day of Pentecost following the first Easter. There are two things we're going to think about – firstly, what actually happened; and secondly, the answers to the crowd's question: 'What does this mean?'

WHAT HAPPENED?

Ten days after Jesus was *lifted up* and taken *out of their sight* (1:9), the believers (about 120 of them) *were all together in one place* (v1). We don't know exactly which place that was, but we do know it was in Jerusalem.

Suddenly, Luke tells us, they all heard a noise like a strong wind, they all saw something that looked like tongues of fire, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gave them the ability to speak in languages they'd never learned, the mother tongues of many of the people who were staying in Jerusalem at the time. Luke doesn't tell us explicitly, but the story implies that the believers went out of the house and into the streets, proclaiming *the mighty works of God*, in many different languages (vv 8-11). The crowds were bewildered; people were asking, "What's going on? What's this all about?" And Peter was inspired to preach a sermon, explaining what was happening, and putting it into the context of the history of God's people, culminating in the story of Jesus himself. Our passage includes only the first part of Peter's sermon, where he explains that the event that they've all witnessed is the fulfilment of a prophecy made by Joel.

Luke describes the believers' experience here in these words: *they were all filled with the Holy Spirit* (v 4). Peter, quoting Joel, speaks of God pouring out his Spirit on everyone (v 17). In chapter 1, before Jesus is taken up into heaven, he says to the apostles, *wait for the promise of the Father. . . you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. . . you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you* (1:4,5,8). We need to remember that all these various words and phrases describe the same reality, which the believers experienced on the Day of Pentecost. And as John Stott puts it, there's no substitute for this reality:

Without the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship would be inconceivable, even impossible. There can be no life without the life-giver, no understanding without the Spirit of truth, no fellowship without the unity of the Spirit, no Christlikeness of character apart from his fruit, and no effective witness without his power. As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead.¹

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

It's actually not that difficult to understand what happened at Pentecost. It isn't necessarily so easy to answer the crowd's question in verse 12: *What does this mean?*

There are answers to that question both in today's passage, and in other places in Acts and the rest of the New Testament.

Firstly, as Peter clearly states in the second part of our passage, God is fulfilling his promise to pour out his Spirit on all believers. In Old Testament times, prophets, priests and kings were anointed with the Spirit. Peter points out Joel's prophecy that *in the last days*, things will be different. God promises to pour out his Spirit on *all flesh* (v 17). This doesn't mean that every single person will receive the Holy Spirit. What it does mean is that every member of the Lord's family, everyone who knows God, everyone who is a follower of Jesus Christ, will receive the Holy Spirit, will be filled with the Holy Spirit, will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.

The second answer to the question, *What does this mean?* is that from the Day of Pentecost onwards, we're *in the last days* (v 17). The believers experienced three things as they were filled with the Holy Spirit: they heard a noise like a wind, they saw what looked like tongues of fire, and they were given the ability to speak in other languages. The symbols of wind, fire and speech call to mind some of the times when the Lord appeared to his people in the Old Testament. For example, Moses sings of the Lord's powerful breath opening the path for his people through the Red Sea (Exodus 15:8,10). *Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire* (Exodus 19:18) . . . *God spoke* (Exodus 20:1). Fire is also a symbol of cleansing – John the Baptist also spoke of a cleansing fire (Luke 3:16-17). The wind, fire and speech on the Day of Pentecost pointed to the beginning of the new age of the Spirit, or what Peter calls *the last days*. We're still living in *the last days* now; they will continue until The Last Day, when Jesus will return in the same way that the apostles saw him go to heaven (1:11).

The third answer to the question, *What does this mean?* is that the message of the gospel is both needed by, and available to, every single person, regardless of nationality, gender, age or status. The passage tells us that there were people present in the crowd representing *every nation under heaven* (v 5). Each of them heard the believers *telling in their own tongues the mighty works of God* (v 11), showing very clearly that the Lord longs to have a close, personal relationship with everyone, no matter what their language or nationality. There's no such thing as a special, sacred language, which we need to use to

communicate with God – he will speak to each one of us, and hear our prayers, in our own ordinary, everyday language, because that's the only way we can truly be intimate with him.

Just as there's no distinction in terms of nationality or ancestry, so there's no distinction in terms of gender, age or status. The quotation from the prophet Joel speaks of *sons and daughters, . . . young men . . . and old men, . . . my male servants and female servants* (vv 17-18). The Holy Spirit is poured out on every single person who is willing to receive him, on every single person who acknowledges Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

The fourth answer to the question, *What does this mean?* is that this event fulfils Jesus' own promise in 1:8: *you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses . . .* This promise was given to the 11 apostles, those who'd been with Jesus throughout his ministry, and the events surrounding his death and resurrection. Their three years' training had given them the basis of what they needed to spread the good news throughout the world, but even these men, who'd been closest to Jesus, weren't able to be effective witnesses until the Holy Spirit had come upon them and filled them with power.

The effect is instantaneous! As soon as they're filled with the Holy Spirit, both they and the rest of the 120 believers, begin to talk in other languages, about the great things that God has done! And Peter's inspired to preach a sermon, with no time for any preparation – and 3,000 people are converted! Presumably some of those 3,000 go back

to their own countries and become witnesses themselves, to their families, friends and neighbours.

CONCLUSION

I don't suppose that Peter and his friends, that day, thought for a moment that Jesus' followers would still be here nearly 2,000 years later. But the fact is that we are. We're still in the last days, God still pours out his Spirit on all believers, every single person still needs to hear the gospel, and as Jesus' followers we have both the power and the responsibility to be his witnesses, proclaiming his message to the ends of the earth. From the Day of Pentecost until the Day of Judgment, there's a great opportunity to be Jesus' witnesses, to help other people to call out to the Lord for help, so they too can be saved. You may not feel that you have that power; you may not feel that it should be your responsibility. But if you're a follower of Jesus Christ this morning, then you do and you have. If you're not confident about going about it, there are two things you can do: pray, and come along to the evangelism course which we'll be running a bit later in the year.

I'm going to finish by repeating the quotation from John Stott which I used earlier, and then praying for us:

Without the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship would be inconceivable, even impossible. There can be no life without the life-giver, no understanding without the Spirit of truth, no fellowship without the unity of the Spirit, no Christlikeness of character apart from his fruit, and no effective witness without

his power. As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead.

Lord Jesus, today we are the ones to whom you've entrusted the privilege and responsibility of being your witnesses, and proclaiming your message. Pour out your Spirit on us afresh this morning, we pray, so that we might be enabled to speak and to live in such a way that we proclaim the great things that you have done, that others may call out to you for help, and be saved. In your gracious name we pray: Amen.

¹ John R W Stott, The Message of Acts, (Leicester, IVP, 1991)