

## **PENTECOST SERMON, 5<sup>th</sup> June 2022**

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I remember going to the theatre to watch a play called “Abigails Party”. It was the story of five neighbours all gathered together in one home for a little party. Abigail’s party was next door. It begins quite politely with everyone watching their manners and having airs and graces about them. One character in particular Angela possessed qualities of both submissiveness as well as domineering. She had a screechy annoying voice and an equally piercing laugh. Combined with the know it all neighbour Beverly who seemed to ask people what they wanted to drink and then proceed to change it to her own choice, they had the world sown up, sliced and quartered. It was a play about keeping up appearances, or keeping up with the Jones’ in some respects and everyone seemed to be talking past each other. There was constant babble and as the alcohol continued flowing the babble became more aggressive and incoherent. When you are drunk you begin to say things that might have been bottling up inside of you for a long time, a different persona takes over and you start to babble.

In the book of Acts when the Holy Spirit appeared like tongues of fire resting on the people gathered, they began to speak in different tongues. It was like babbling and some said that these people were drunk. But the languages were coherent and some recognised their own language being spoken by foreigners.

The word babble comes from the name Babylon, the event in the book of Genesis in chapter 11 when the people of one language and nation tried to

build a tower up to the heavens in order that they would make a name for themselves. It says in verse 6 that God said “now then, these are all one people and they speak one language; this is just the beginning of what they are going to do. Soon they will be able to do anything they want! Let us go down and mix up their language so that they will not understand one another...and from there he scattered them all over the earth. Our reading from the second chapter of Acts is said to perhaps be an undoing of that curse. The term tongues within the context of the book of Acts are described as “foreign languages” which others could understand. It differs from the terms “tongues” in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, the Greek word for this term is “glossalalia” where we get our English word “glossary” from. This act of speaking in tongues is not necessarily understood by others and needs interpretation.

The day of Pentecost is the day in which the gathered nations witnessed and received the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire settling on all the people there. Something happened on this day of Pentecost which transformed and empowered these waiting disciples. How else would you explain this transformation from a small group of faithful into a vigorous and dynamic community which went out and changed the world?

In American Samoa in Leone in the early 1840’s George Lundi a missionary from London recorded how he went about his preparation for Sunday service as normal and had not himself experienced the power of the Holy Spirit in any dramatic way. On the Sunday that he preached people were slain in the spirit and there was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that was far beyond what words could describe. The Spiritual revival that hit Samoa at that time went on for two years and spread over to Western Samoa to Upolu and Savaii. This was the internalising of the spirit

and provided a new model of faith and ministry for the church, it became a spontaneous revelation.

The gift of speaking in tongues is said to be a sign of faith for those who have chosen to follow Jesus. Today there are many different theological opinions and practices surrounding this event. Was it just something that happened two thousand years ago, or is it something that is available for all believers today? Pentecostal and charismatic churches not just the para churches but also some believers in some of the mainline churches including ours believe that baptism in the spirit must follow ones conversion to Christianity, and the manifestation of baptism in the spirit is the receiving of the gift of speaking in tongues.

The debate is “is it for all, or is it for some?” I believe that the gifts of the spirit are shared among many, to some as Paul said are given the gift of preaching, to others the gift of teaching, to others the gift of speaking in tongues as well as many other gifts. We are not all preachers and teachers, but our church believes in the priesthood of all believers.

As a teenager, I went to the a “life in the Spirit” seminar that was held at our church on Thursday evenings over a six or ten week period. We began by talking about the gift of tongues and what it meant to live in the spirit. The seminars were arranged so that at the end of your few weeks of study it was to culminate with everyone receiving the gift of speaking in tongues. The classes were staggered so there were some ahead of us who would be receiving this gift before us. I remember listening to the prayers of those who were ministering to the receiver. There was this one particular woman didn’t start speaking in tongues? Why not? Surely there was nothing wrong with the prayers so maybe there was something wrong with the

receiver. I heard them say, “What sin have you not confessed?” God cannot work through a sinner unless you confess and repent!

Even as a teenager I was enraged, how dare they determine who should and should not receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. How dare they presume that her silence was a result of unconfessed sin! How dare they even judge her for non-compliance with the programme after ten weeks of attendance. It was at this point in my own spiritual journey that I developed for myself a new pathway of faith, one that gathered up the broken hearts of those who were left feeling rejected and downcast by judgemental Christians. This poor woman went home in tears, she probably felt faithless, sinful and totally dejected. More harm than good came out of her experience.

So what happens when we try and set the standard for how God should be moving and working among us? When this happens we begin to close our eyes and ears to the spontaneity of the grace of God and the soft murmuring of the spirit that hovers over us all the time.

The story of Pentecost is the story of the life of the Christian community. The story of how and what the Holy Spirit does for the people of God. And we may think that we have never had an experience like that day in the book of Acts, but we have experiences and pieces of that story. A small taste of the spirit here, when we find a way through the dark tunnel to the little speck of light at the end. A little of its gifts there when we visit friends who are sick and witness the power of God’s spirit empowering them to wellness and wholeness. What a privilege to bear witness to the power of God moving in the lives of others and in our own. This power, it might have been strange events and we just called it chance or coincidence. But it might have been a small token of the Holy Spirit too.

I know that if each one of us here were given the opportunity to stand up and testify to the work of God in our lives we would all have a different story to tell. How every struggle that we may have experienced has helped mould us into stronger individuals and Christians. Sometimes hitting rock bottom can put a new perspective on life even if it is “I know where I don’t ever want to go again”. A newfound sense of hope and well-being emerges out of crisis situations. God in the midst of crisis turns us all into wounded healers.

The day of Pentecost became for the disciples a new beginning, it gave them a new hope. Jesus said as part of his departing speech to his disciples, in a little while I will be gone, but I will send you a helper, the comforter to be with you. The Parousia, the Holy Spirit. The disciples and many of the followers of Christ, didn’t really understand at the time what he was talking about. Some of them believed that he would go and then return again shortly after, particularly when he said “in a little while”. There was not much action after Jesus left, people got complacent, even some of the law as laid down on the sermon of the mount didn’t need to be understood because Jesus wouldn’t be gone long he would be back in a little while. But when he didn’t return, when this second coming didn’t happen the disciples began to internalise Christ within. The coming of the Holy Spirit is the delayed Parousia, the coming of Christ as the helper and comforter as promised. It is the promise of God to Moses out of the burning bush, I will be with you. Emmanuel God with us. Amen.