

Pentecost Sunday – some thoughts

(I suggest you read Acts of the Apostles 1.6-11 and 2.1-36 first.)

The feast of Pentecost celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples, the nascent Church. On this feast we should keep in mind all that has been celebrated by the Church since the beginning of Holy Week. Here we see fulfilled the words of the parable of the wicked tenants (Matt.21.33-44) which Jesus told in the week before his death. In this parable the tenants of the vineyard represent the Jewish religious authorities, the servants represent the earlier and the later prophets who are sent by God to collect the produce from the vineyard, but they are dealt with violently and put to death. The owner sends his own son thinking, "They will respect my son" (Matthew 21.37). When they saw the son, they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

This is what the Jewish authorities did with Jesus, the Son, when he is crucified outside the city walls. Having disposed of Jesus, do the authorities think they can from this moment forward conduct affairs according to their judgement? You cannot kill the Son of God and carry on as though nothing has happened. They have been given plenty of evidence with the words Jesus spoke and the signs he gave but the Jewish authorities have a vested interest in maintaining their own comfortable positions.

At the end of the parable Jesus quotes Psalm 118, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," and then come the very important words, "This is the Lord's doing a marvel in our eyes." Because the Jewish authorities thought they understood the scriptures perfectly they failed to understand the point Jesus was making. They failed to see the hand of God at work here. They thought by removing Jesus from the scene they could continue to manage "the vineyard", but this is not God's plan, Jesus is the cornerstone.

The parable tells us that the landowner will remove those unworthy tenants and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will deliver the produce. The resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit tell us how God means to put his plan into action as symbolically foretold in the parable. Jesus' resurrection from the dead means not only that they have not disposed of Jesus, but also that Jesus is who he claims to be, the Messiah, the Son of God. Having fulfilled his Father's will, the Father brings Jesus back to life and he ascends to the righthand side of God the Father in heaven and Jesus can now send the Holy Spirit.

We must be quite clear about the resurrection. It is a fact of history, it really happened. Jesus rose from the dead the disciples did not see a ghost when he appeared to them in the upper room. The dead body that lay in the tomb is alive again, now not subject to space and time, but otherwise the same body. Jesus shows them his hands and his side, the apostles can identify him. Jesus eats a piece of grilled fish with them and acts with the disciples as he always did before his death except that now his presence is not permanent. They are to be witnesses to this resurrection.

Jesus tells his disciples 'you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria and indeed to the ends of the earth' (Acts1.8) proclaiming that he, Jesus, is the Son of God, risen from the dead. The gospels tell us that the disciples found it difficult to understand all that Jesus said and taught before his death and now, still trying to cope with everything that had happened since that Last Supper together, they were in fear of the Jewish authorities, still lacked proper understanding and remained huddled together secluded from the general public as far as possible. How were they to overcome their fear and lack of understanding? Jesus knew all about the fearfulness of the disciples and their poor understanding.

It was not necessary that the disciples should have full understanding at this time. We read in Luke's gospel that Jesus at the Last Supper said to Peter, 'I have prayed for you Simon that your

faith may not fail' (Luke 22.31). Jesus did pray not for his greater understanding, he prayed for the one thing necessary, Peter's faith. 'I have prayed for you Simon that your faith may not fail.' Jesus looked for faith and trust in him and prayed, 'Father, keep those you have given me true to your name' (John 17.11). Jesus didn't pray for greater understanding because, 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete...the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name (he) will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you' (John 14.16 & 26).

Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his disciples, 'You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon you' (Acts 1.8). These are Jesus' last words to his disciples and after Jesus ascended to the Father they returned to the upper room, 'With one heart all these were constantly persevering in prayer' (Acts 1.14) awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Luke in the Acts of the Apostles says quite simply, 'When Pentecost day had come, they were all together, when suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of a rushing wind, filling the entire house in which they were sitting; and there appeared to them tongues as of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak different languages as the Spirit gave them power to express themselves.'

The scene then moves to the crowd outside, where there were people 'from every nation under heaven' (Acts 2.5). Strangely all the people from different countries, each with their own native language, heard the disciples speaking and they could understand and the marvel is increased by Luke naming many of the countries from which people had come; they said of the disciples 'we hear them speaking in our own languages about the marvels of God' (Acts 2.11).

We have several things to notice here. The fearful, timorous, hesitant disciples are now full of courage and knowledge. Jesus' promise has been fulfilled. The disciples preach boldly and the confusion in languages which occurred at the Tower of Babel seems to be reversed, everyone can hear and understand 'in our own languages about the marvels of God.' This is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the disciples are filled with power from on high.

This understanding of language by many and varied peoples is the wonder of Pentecost Day. The crowds are attracted by the wonder of this phenomenon. At first some just scoff saying, 'They are full of new wine' (Acts 2.13). Peter, with the other disciples gathered round, addressed the crowd following rabbinic convention by applying three scriptural texts to the situation. First the quotation is from Joel (3.1-5)

In the days to come – it is the Lord who speaks –
I will pour out my spirit on all mankind.
Their sons and daughters shall prophesy,
your young men shall see visions,
your old men dream dreams.
Even on my slaves, men and women,
in those days I will pour out my spirit.

I will display portents in heaven above
and signs on earth below.
The sun will be turned into darkness
and the moon into blood
before the great Day of the Lord dawns.
All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.

This is really two texts without division the first revealing the outpouring of the Spirit and the second the end time; the beginning of the final era of the world waiting for Christ to come again as the angels said he would when Jesus ascended to the Father. The crowds are witnessing this outpouring (Joel 3.1-2) by being able to understand what the disciples are saying in their own native tongue. Peter tells the people about Jesus the Nazarene, and his works of power which demonstrated that he was from God, they handed Jesus over to men outside the Law and he was crucified but death had no power over him. Then Peter quotes Psalm 16.8-11:

I kept the Lord before my sight always,
for he is at my right hand so that I may not be shaken.
Therefore, my heart rejoiced, my tongue delighted,
my body too will rest in hope
for you will not abandon my soul to Hades
or allow your holy one to see corruption.
You have taught me the ways of life
you will fill me with joy at your presence.

This psalm was attributed to King David and Peter can say 'with confidence about our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is among us to this day' (Acts 2.29). In other words, if you enter David's tomb you will find his remains, but Jesus' tomb is empty. David, in this psalm, is not speaking of himself, he knew that God had sworn him an oath to set one of his descendants on his throne. 'And when your days are over and you fall asleep with your ancestors, I shall appoint your heir, your own son to succeed you; and I shall make his sovereignty secure.' 'Your House and your sovereignty will always stand secure before me and your throne be established for ever.' (2 Samuel 7.12 & 16). David was speaking of the resurrection of the Messiah when he said, 'You will not allow your holy one see corruption.' Jesus fulfils scripture.

God the Father did not allow Jesus' body to remain enclosed in a tomb, Jesus is raised to new life and his disciples are witnesses to this fact. Now this Jesus raised up on high at God's right hand 'has received from the Father the Holy Spirit, who was promised, and what you see and hear is the outpouring of that Spirit.' (Acts 2.33). Listening to the words coming from the mouths of the disciples and being able to understand, the crowd are witnessing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as Christ promised his disciples. These happenings should enable faith.

Peter concludes his Pentecost Day speech saying, 'David himself did not go up to heaven yet he himself said', and he quotes Psalm 110.1:

The Lord said to my Lord:
Sit at my right hand
Until I make your enemies
a footstool for you.

The Lord God said to my Lord, my (David's) descendant the Messiah, sit at my right, till I make your enemies a footstool under your feet. We are not told when his enemies will become a footstool under his feet, a symbol of Christ's final victory. Peter concludes, 'the whole house of Israel may know for certain that God made him Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified' (Acts 2.36). Pentecost Day confirms for the disciples who Jesus is and they go out with the power of the Spirit to proclaim Jesus, risen from the dead, is the long-awaited Messiah, the Lord.