

### “A Penchant for Pentecost”

The Church has trouble figuring out what to do with the Feast of Pentecost. We encourage people to wear red on this day because red is the liturgical color. But that is odd in that we do not encourage people to wear purple in Lent, white at Christmas, or green during Ordinary Time. But we must get the congregation involved in Pentecost somehow, wearing red is one way to do so.

Churches are also known to put streamers on poles and have youth wave them about during the procession into the church. The streamers are supposed to illustrate the tongues of fire that descended upon the disciples on the first Pentecost. It is clever but it smacks to me of the 70s when the Church was trying to be hip and cool.

Another common way of celebrating Pentecost is with a birthday party. Some people refer to Pentecost as the birthday of the Church. The problem is that it is not the Church’s birthday. It might be the birthday of evangelism, but there is nothing to suggest that the Church writ large was founded that day. But people like cake, birthday parties are fun, and it is a way to get children involved in the celebration.

One of the most common ways of marking Pentecost is in the reading of the passage from Acts in multiple languages. We have even done that here. When I first came to the Episcopal Church, I thought it was cool to have people read Acts in various languages. But as time has passed, I have found it more theater than good liturgy. The passage from Acts tells us that the people who were from numerous countries heard their language being spoken by the disciples. However, having parishioners speaking in different languages simultaneously no one can understand what is said.

When we get perturbed with how the world has commercialized Christmas, we talk about recovering the true meaning of Christmas. How do we recover the true meaning of Pentecost? One way might be to look closely at the language Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit that came down on the Day of Pentecost. Interestingly, in the Gospel of John Jesus refers to the Spirit most often as the Advocate in our translations.

The Greek word behind that is Παράκλητος (paracletos) or paraclete. Paraclete is the combination of two Greek words. *Para* meaning with or alongside and *kalein* “to call.” Thus, the one called to be with you. In practice the word carries multiple meanings. One of those is “advocate” or “counselor” as in the lawyer for the defense. Jesus is sending a Spirit that will act as the defender of the disciples as they go out into the world to spread the Good News of Christ. Paraclete can also mean “comforter,” as in one who stays with you when you are in distress and helps you through it. Paraclete can also mean “companion” as in one who walks beside you through good and bad. If the disciples are to testify to the Good News it is natural that they would need and comforter, companion, and advocate.

The first experience that the disciples have of the Paraclete is on the Day of Pentecost ten days after Jesus ascends into heaven. The Book of Acts tells us that “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.”<sup>1</sup> Imagine that moment, the deafening noise of a rushing wind filling the room inside the house. Then the mysterious tongues

---

<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:2-3 NRSV.

of fire that descended upon their heads. It had to overwhelm the disciples, male and female.

Then suddenly they were testifying to Jesus as the Christ the Messiah. The disciples who had been hiding in fear for their lives rush into the streets to evangelize. As they do so all the people around them understand what they are saying. Imagine, being in a metropolitan center like Washington, DC with the babble of many languages in the air, when suddenly a band of people start speaking and no matter what language you speak you hear their words in that language. The Book of Acts records the peoples' response, "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?'"<sup>2</sup>

Here is the clue to what we 21<sup>st</sup> century people do with Pentecost. We look for the fire that settled on the disciples to settle on us and those around us. So often when we read scripture we think, "it happened once and long ago."<sup>3</sup> That is not what the scripture is telling us. It is telling us that what happened then is available to us now. We too can be set ablaze by the Paraclete/Spirit. We can testify to the Good News of Jesus Christ in our lives.

We do not need to speak another language to do so. We can testify to others by how we live. The adage is "actions speak louder than words." If we live like we really believe the Gospel people will figure it out. We will surely stumble, and people will see how we humbly rebound with the help of the Paraclete—comforter/companion/advocate.

If we walk out into the world today no different than when we arrived, then Pentecost has lost its meaning. If we can accept that we are being set on fire by God through the gift of the Paraclete, we can be a light for all the world to see. We can be like the disciples speaking God's truth because the Spirit of truth is with us and guides us. We are all descendants of those first disciples. We all have God's truth to share.

I believe the reason the world is in the mess that it is in is because too few of us speak God's truth. There is more to our faith than coming to church. We need to take church out into the world. Too many of us leave it up to others, when we, like those first disciples can take it to the streets.

This is our Day of Pentecost. Feel the fire. Hear the Word. Speak the Word. Live the Word. And never fear, for the Advocate/comforter/companion/Paraclete/Holy Spirit is with us forever just as Jesus promised.

---

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:7b-12 NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> From the poem by Marie Howe, "You think it happened once and long ago"