

“PENTECOST – WHIT SUNDAY”

“The Birthday of the Church”

Scripture Reading – Acts, 2:1-13

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.

Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine”.




‘Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.’

Ephesians, 5:18, NIV

Held fifty days after Passover, Pentecost was also called ‘The Festival of Harvest’.

It was one of three major annual festivals – Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles – at which every male Jew who lived within twenty miles of Jerusalem was legally bound to attend. Jesus was crucified at Passover time, and he ascended forty days after his resurrection. The Holy Spirit came fifty days after the Resurrection, and ten days after the Ascension. Jews of many different nations gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost. Thus, Peter’s speech was given to an international audience, and it resulted in a worldwide harvest of new believers – the first converts to Christianity.

Pentecost, literally ‘THE FEAST OF WEEKS’, was significant for three reasons:

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|  | HISTORICAL | <i>Commemorated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai.</i> |
|  | AGRICULTURAL | <i>The first omer of barley was offered to God and two loaves of bread were offered in gratitude for the ingathered harvest.</i> |
|  | HOLIDAY | <i>The Law declared that it was a holiday for all people.</i> |

‘THE BIRTHDAY OF THE CHURCH’

The Church was born under the stigma that the world thought they were drunk!

‘Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine”.’

Acts, 2:12-13, NIV

Some of the people who were in Jerusalem reached the conclusion that the apostles were drunk – It tells us something of the spirit of excitement and joy that prevailed on that day...

‘Three prospectors found a rich vein of gold in California during the gold rush days. They realised what a great discovery they had, and decided, “We’ve a really good thing going here as long as no one else finds out about it”. So, they each took a vow to keep it secret. Then they headed for town to file their claim and get the equipment necessary to mine the gold. True to their vows, they did not say a word to anybody. They filed their claim, bought the equipment, and headed back to their mine. When they did, a crowd of people followed them because the expression on their faces had given them away; their faces were aglow in anticipation of the wealth that soon would be theirs. People knew that they must have found something very special, so a crowd followed them excitedly out of town.’

You see, when there is joy inside, it is very hard to keep it from showing!

‘Erma Bombeck tells the story about a little boy at church with his mother. He was a good little boy, quiet and well behaved. He didn’t cause any problems. But every once in a while he would stand up in the pew, turn around, look at the people behind him and smile at them. His smile was infectious, and soon everybody behind him was starting to smile back at him, too. It was all going fine until the mother realised what the little boy was doing. When she did, she grabbed him by his ear and twisted it a bit, told him to sit down and remember that he was in church. Then he started sniffing and crying, and she turned to him and said, “That’s better”.’

It’s sad, isn’t it, that some have the impression that when we come to church that it is all gloom and doom, and that there is nothing here to really bring joy into our lives?

However, Pentecost shows that the first Christians discovered joy unspeakable in the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul wrote: **‘REJOICE IN THE LORD... REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS, AND AGAIN I SAY, REJOICE!’** (see **Philippians, 4:4**).

*Holy Ghost, on thee we wait; this day in faith we celebrate
Thy coming from on high; no rushing, mighty wind we hear,
No cloven tongues of fire appear, yet we believe thee nigh.*

Will J Brand, SASB 198:1

Today, we consider the significance of the events at ‘The Birthday of the Church’...

1. THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

‘When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.’

Acts, 2:1, NIV

Pentecost was a once-in-history event, when the Christian Church was born.

‘We may never know precisely what happened on the Day of Pentecost, but we do know that it was one of the supremely great days of the Christian Church, for on that day the Holy Spirit came to the Christian Church in a very special way.’

R T Kendall

Pentecost was a vivid realisation of the promises of Jesus:

“I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Luke, 24:49, NIV

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you...”

Acts, 1:8a, NIV

There were three startling signs that accompanied the coming of the Spirit: the sound of a rushing wind, tongues of fire, and the believers praising God in various languages...

POWER WAS VISUALISED

‘Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.’

Acts, 2:2-3, NIV

The disciples were alerted to the supernatural because of a violent wind.

Inside the house where they were meeting, there seemed to be a tornado blowing around. The word ‘SPIRIT’ is the same as ‘WIND’ in both the Hebrew and the Greek. The people did not feel the ‘WIND’ blowing; they heard the sound of ‘A VIOLENT WIND’.

(Note: It is possible that the believers were in the Temple when this occurred, for the word ‘HOUSE’ can also refer to the Temple!)

‘Jesus said to Nicodemus, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit”.’

John, 3:8, NIV

After the sound of the wind, there came the sight of the fire.

Tongues of fire separated and came to rest on each of the disciples – 120 human candles burning brightly together. The tongues of fire symbolised the powerful witness of the church to the people. Of course, our tongues can be set on fire either by heaven or by hell (see **James, 3:5-6**).

When you combine wind and fire together the result is a blaze, or even a raging inferno. The wind and fire is a powerful and unstoppable combination.

Fire cleanses and purges; it illumines and energises; it also warms.

Whilst attending a church service in 1791, Robert Burns wrote in a church hymnal:

As cold a wind as ever blew. As cold a church, and in it few.

As cold a minister has ever spak. You’d better be hot if I come back.

POWER WAS VOCALISED

‘All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.’

Acts, 2:4-6, NIV

The believers were praising God, not preaching the Gospel, in known languages.

Luke named fifteen different geographical locations and clearly stated that the citizens of those places heard Peter and the others declare God’s wonderful works in languages they could understand. The Greek word translated ‘LANGUAGES’ in **Acts, 2:6** and ‘TONGUES’ in **Acts, 2:4** is ‘DIALEKTOS’ and refers to a language or dialect of some country or district.

One reason for this gift is because the Gospel is for the whole world.

God wants to speak to every person in his or her own language and give the saving message of salvation in Jesus Christ. The emphasis in the Book of Acts is on worldwide evangelisation, ‘TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH’ (see **Acts, 1:8**). ‘THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST IS THE SPIRIT OF MISSIONS AND THE NEARER WE GET TO HIM, THE MORE INTENSELY MISSIONARY WE MUST BECOME’ (Henry Martyn).

Note: The gift of tongues is not a sign at all for fellow Christians.

‘In the Law it is written: “Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people [the Jews], but even then they will not listen to me”, says the Lord. Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers.’

1 Corinthians, 14:21-22, NIV

POWER WAS VITALISED

‘Jesus said, “For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit”.’

Acts, 1:5, NIV

The Greek word ‘BAPTIZO’ has two meanings, one literal and the other figurative.

The word literally means ‘TO SUBMERGE’, but the figurative meaning is ‘TO BE IDENTIFIED WITH’. The Baptism of the Spirit is that act of God by which he identified believers with the exalted head of the church, Jesus Christ, and formed the spiritual body of Christ on earth.

Historically, this took place at Pentecost. Today, it takes place whenever a sinner trusts Jesus and is born again. Therefore, you are baptised in the Spirit when you are saved.

‘All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.’

Acts, 2:4a, NIV

The infilling of the Holy Spirit has to do with power for witness and service.

We are not exhorted to be baptised by the Holy Spirit, for this is something God does once and for all when we trust in his Son. However, we are commanded to **‘BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT’** (see **Ephesians, 5:18**), for we need his power constantly if we are to serve God effectively.

At Pentecost, the Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit and also experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit; but after that, they experienced many fillings (see **Acts, 4:8; Acts, 4:31; Acts, 9:17 & Acts, 13:9**) but no more baptisms.

2. THE CREATOR OF THE CHURCH

‘When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.’

Acts, 2:1-2, NIV

The Church is Eternal.

From the beginning of time, before the foundation of the world, God had in mind the Church. In addition, Jesus promised that even **‘THE GATES OF HADES WOULD NOT PREVAIL AGAINST IT’**.

Sometimes we act as though Simon Peter called a meeting of the apostles and said to them, “Now we are here today to talk about whether or not we ought to start a Church”. They discuss that for a while, and James makes a formal motion that the apostles start a Church. John seconds the motion, and they unanimously vote to start a Church in Jerusalem.

Of course, it did not happen that way! Did you hear what the Word said?

‘SUDDENLY, A SOUND LIKE THE BLOWING OF A VIOLENT WIND CAME FROM...’ from where? **‘...FROM HEAVEN’**. God started the Church. God created the Church. God brought the Church into being, and it is his Church, not ours. It is essential for us to realise that before growth can happen!

Therefore, this Corps belongs not to The Salvation Army, nor to the Corps Officer, the Local Officers or its Soldiers, in reality, this Corps is not our Corps, nor my Corps, it is his Corps!

During my preparation, I was reminded of an illustration I heard whilst on holiday last Sunday morning. The subject was not about: “WHOSE CHURCH IS IT ANYWAY?” but more along the lines of: “WHOSE WORSHIP IS IT ANYWAY?”. But, I think the illustration will help us here...

‘At times, all the pew-generated commentary forces us preachers to take it to the level of absurdity as we try to parse all the worshippers’ attitudes and then plan services to suit their

felt or perceived needs and desires. “It’s like the church that has four different worship services for the different people of the church’s attendance. One service was for people new to the faith. Another service was for members who liked a more traditional or classical service. A third service was designed for those who lost their faith and were trying to get it back. The fourth service was for people who had been burned at other churches and came with complaints. The church named the four services: Finders, Keepers, Losers, Weepers”.

(Illustration originally taken from www.homileticsonline.com, and quoted in the sermon **‘THE BLUEPRINT FOR WORSHIP’** by Dr Patrick H Wrisley, Senior Pastor and Teaching Elder, Community Presbyterian Church in Celebration, 20 May 2007.)

One of the real dangers of beginning to believe that the Corps is mine is that it is no great leap to believe that the worship is also about me! Such thinking is plainly wrong!

For too many churches, the temptation has been to look at what is happening in the world, and then try to get the Church in step with it. Such actions are plainly wrong!

The Church may never be the most popular institution in the world because the Church runs counter to popular culture. God wants his Church to stand for the truth, to be unshakable in its presentation of the Gospel, because the Church belongs to him. We are his Church.

3. THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

‘They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.’

Acts, 2:3-4, NIV

The purpose of the Church is to communicate the love of God to a lost and dying world.

One of the great themes of Pentecost is communication.

It is really a shame that the whole idea of speaking in tongues has become such a controversial issue. When you read about Pentecost, the truth that comes to the surface is that God gave the gift of tongues to the apostles for one purpose, and that was for the purpose of communication.

They had a problem with communication because people had come from many different nations, and when you read the long list of nations, you realise that a language barrier existed. Because God wanted each of them to hear the message in his own language, he performed a miracle and gave the apostles the gift of tongues so that they could communicate his message.

One of the purposes of the Church is to communicate the message.

Now if God wants to give us a miracle to help us do that, praise him for it. Today, we have to grind it out. Telling people about Jesus is a daunting experience and without the presence, power and guidance of the Holy Spirit it is ineffective, hopeless, and a complete waste of time!

We must do whatever we can do, but the purpose has never changed, and the moment you became a Christian, God commissioned you to share this simple message with our world.

'How many of you have ever watched a sporting event and have seen the giant sign saying "JOHN 3:16"? How many of you have seen that? Rockin' Roland Stuart is responsible for that. His fascinating story appeared in "People's Magazine" a few years ago. Roland Stuart was a drunk, an alcoholic. He met with Jesus, accepted him as Saviour, became a Christian, and God healed him of his alcoholism. One day, the idea struck him that if he could just get into major sporting events and put the Word of God before the people, it would be seen by hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions of people. So today, Rockin' Roland Stuart and his wife, Margaret, and a friend named William James, live a very spartan existence. They drive 55,000 miles a year in an old beat-up van, telling their story, and using their money to buy tickets to major sporting events in order to hang out a sheet stating, "JOHN 3:16".

I wonder how many tens of thousands have turned to read the Word...

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

John, 3:16, NIV

Now that may not be your thing, but the point is, here is a man who heard God's command to tell the world. When you and I are saved by the blood of Jesus, and added to his family, God expects us to do the best we can to communicate that message to a lost and dying world.

4. THE GOAL OF THE CHURCH

'When the people heard Peter's sermon, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call". With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation". Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.'

Acts 2:37-41, NIV

The goal of the church is fellowship.

On the Day of Pentecost there were 3,000 new converts who suddenly experienced something that had never been shared before. All of them knew they were guilty, that they had crucified Christ with their sins. But, they all repented of their sins, they had all been baptized, they had all been redeemed, and they all had been given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Suddenly, they were part of a new society.

They had come out of a world of slavery and superstition, a world of selfishness and greed and dishonesty. They were now part of a new fellowship that was unique in the world. A different atmosphere prevailed because there were 3,000 changed people that God had made different and new. They were a 'born again' community of new Christian desiring to share their faith and work out the implications of their faith together.

No wonder their number quickly grew to 5,000 and more and more people were attracted to them. It was a phenomenon different from anything else in the entire world.

The Church must always be that.

Most institutions are only interested in what they can get from you, but the Church wants to give. Many will take advantage of you, but the Church is where people can come and hear the truth, be ministered to, and be introduced to the one who will meet all needs in your life.

We are to be a different people, a different culture.

An oasis in the midst of a desert, a shade tree on a summer day, a cup of cool water when you are thirsty, a place to come and to know that you will not be rejected, that you will be accepted and loved, brothers and sisters, the family of God.

Application

The world changed at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came and the Church was born.

The Holy Spirit did not come because the people of God had become more committed, more prayerful, or more spiritual.

The manifestation of the Holy Spirit was entirely a matter of grace, a gift from God, given to the Church at a pre-determined time that the Lord had decided from eternity.

*The Holy Spirit came like **a violent wind** – that signified the Presence of God and **as tongues of fire** – that signified the Cleansing of God.*

Why 'TONGUES OF FIRE'?



TONGUES

Symbolising speech and the communication of the Gospel.



FIRE

Symbolising God's purifying presence, which burns away the undesirable elements of our lives, and sets our hearts aflame to ignite the lives of others.

With these outward signs came the Holy Spirit as an inward, invisible reality that demonstrated his presence by the transforming revolution in the lives of the disciples.

'Tis fire we want, for fire we plead, Send the fire!

The fire will meet our every need, Send the fire!

For strength to ever do the right,

For grace to conquer in the fight.

For power to walk the world in white, Send the fire!

William Booth, SASB 203:3