

2. Acts 2: Pentecost

Sequence

- Reading Acts 2:1-13
- Shavuot / Pentecost
- Within Acts
- The Pentecost tableau
- Commentary
- Message
- Theological themes
- Thoughts for today

Reading

- Read the story
- Observations / comments / queries
- Lectionary: Pentecost Sunday ABC

Shavuot / Pentecost

- **Shavuot** or **Pentecost** is one of the three pilgrimage feast of Judaism. Legislation can be found in Ex 23:16; 34:12; Lev 23:15-21; Dt 16:9-12.
- In the Hebrew Bible: the Festival of Weeks.
- It was an important harvest feast as we see from **Paul's** eagerness to be in Jerusalem for it (Acts 20:16).
- By the time of Jesus' ministry, it had also come to mark the giving of the **Law**, the Torah, on Mount Sinai. The metaphors used—**sound, wind and fire**—all have a considerable OT background.
- The link was clear in Rabbinic Judaism:
- "Pentecost is the day on which the Torah was given." Babylonian Talmud *b. Pesah* 69b.
- The feast is also mentioned in the **Mishnah**, in the significant context of the last judgment:
- At four seasons of the year the world is judged: at Passover for grain; **at Pentecost for fruit of the tree**; at the New Year all who enter the world pass before Him like troops since it is said, He who fashions the hearts of them al& who considers all their works (Ps. 33:15); and on the Festival [of Tabernacles] they are judged in regard to water. (Rosh Hashanah 1:2)
- In the third month after the Israelites went out from the land of Egypt, on the very day, they came to the Desert of Sinai. (Exodus 19:1) That is, **roughly 50 days later**. Cf. fire, sound and speech.
- Luke promotes Gentile mission, but,
- on the occasion of Jewish feast
- in fulfillment of early promises
- and so, the first fruits of the harvest are taken in
- the wind will blow Paul as far as Rome itself

Within Acts

- This dramatic scene and commentary correspond in some measure to the opening **tableau** in Luke 4:16-30. Like that opening scene in the Gospel, the portrayal of the day of Pentecost is both **synthetic** and **programmatically**.
- It is **synthetic** in that it gathers into a foundational scene the many experiences of the Holy Spirit which marked the life of the early church.
- It is **programmatically** in that this is the scene which holds the energy behind the breath-taking expansion of the Way recounted in the Acts.
- Luke lays out the material in the **symbolic language** of **forty** days of appearances and the outpouring the Spirit **fifty** days after Passover.

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.

Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built.

And the Lord said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and **confuse their language** there, so that they will not understand one another's speech."

So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (Genesis 11:1-9)

- By reversing linguistic disunity, the experience is revealed as both an eschatological event of new creation and a utopian restoration of the unity of the human race.
- The gift of the Spirit is the present eschatological gift and this gift is for the entire human race.

Joel 2:28 Then afterward (Luke redacts: **in the last days**) I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. 29 Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. (Luke adds: **and they shall prophesy**). 30 I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. 31 The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes (Luke redacts: **before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day**). 32 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; (Luke *omits the remaining phrases*;) *for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.*

- The text of Joel directs our understanding of the Pentecost event and links it to the **rest of the Acts**.
- The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were greatly astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. (Acts 10:45-46).
- When they heard this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus, and when Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they began to speak in tongues and to prophesy. (Acts 19:5-6).
- Cf. So if the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and unbelievers or uninformed people enter, will they not say that you have lost your minds? (= 1 Corinthians 14:23; cf. 1 Corinthians 12-14 in general).

Pentecost Tableau

- This is a symbolic tableau, capturing multiple experiences of the Spirit, in dialogue with Genesis 11:1-9 and Joel.
- It combines the two themes of the Jewish feast of Shavuot / Pentecost.
- **Harvest:** Pentecost initiates the gathering in of the Gentiles. Harvest language always suggests sifting, i.e. judgment.
- The giving of the **Law** on Sinai: Pentecost celebrated the writing of the Law on the hearts of believers (cf. Jeremiah).

vv.1-4: a single unity

A. v.2 *Sound* like

B. v. 2 *Sound* filled
 A* v.3 *Tongues* like
 B* v. 3 *Tongues* sat

vv. 5-13: the tableau

A. v. 5 Introduction
 B. v.6 Summary
 C. vv. 7-12 development of the summary
 D. v. 13 A contrary explanation

Commentary

v. 1

- The beginning of the Christian harvest which is the theme of Acts, taking us from Jerusalem to Rome.
- Cf. Now when the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set out resolutely to go to Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51)
- The languages are perhaps not meant literally. It means more that the Gospel message “speaks” to every human heart, regardless of culture etc.

v. 2

- God as a wind is found elsewhere, both in the OT and the NT. It is invisible, unpredictable, uncontrollable and powerful.
- Thus it suggests itself as an image for God. This is true, yet it is not the wind which fills the house, but the sound!
- We are to think of an overwhelming, deafening sound.

v.3

- Distributed might be better than divided, because the author stresses unity throughout.
- Fire was equally mysterious to early humans – being apparently not a thing, yet capable of giving light and heat (positive), death and destruction (negative).
- Cf. John answered them all, “I baptise you with water, but one more powerful than I am is coming—I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Luke 3:16)
- For John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” (Acts 1:5)

v.4

- “Filled with the Holy Spirit” is a prophetic idiom.
- Speaking in tongues was apparently a frequent phenomenon in the early church (1 Cor 14:1-33)
- “Filled” is a fulfillment of a prediction and command of Jesus (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5, 8)
- See above under Joel.

v.5

- Suddenly, we seem to be outdoors.
- This suggests that we are to think not of all nations, but of Jews in these lands or among these nations.

v.6

- This represents the reversal of the Tower of Babel story in Genesis.
- The story itself is confused, which fits the desired narrative effect! Why should hearing people in your native language be a problem?
- Again, he is not thinking of transient residents, but rather permanent foreign residents. The city did have a mixed population.

vv. 7-8

- Luke uses the crowd to express appropriate reaction.

- *Foreign* languages with *Galilean* accents? Galileans were known for their poor linguistic skills.
- And a voice sounded forth from out of the midst of the fire which had flowed from heaven, a most marvellous and awful voice, the flame being endowed with articulate speech **in a language familiar to the hearers**, which expressed its words with such clearness and distinctness that the people seemed rather to be seeing than hearing it. Philo *On the Decalogue* 11.46
- In reality, the story symbolises the universality of the message and the capacity of the Gospel to address all sorts and conditions of people in their own terms.

vv. 9-11

- The list is symbolic – because the details are problematic. E.g. why Judea?
- Because the list mixes ethnic groups, residents and Roman citizens, and then ethnic groups again, it is unlikely to have been written by Luke.
- It omits all of Greece (!) and included the irrelevant Parthians and Medes (no longer politically significant).
- They have no further role in the story.

The Table of the Nations

- This is the account of Noah's sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Sons were born to them after the flood. ... These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, by their nations, and from these the nations spread over the earth after the flood. (Genesis 10:1, 32) *Updated, so to speak, in Acts 2*
- Directions from Jerusalem:
- east: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia
- centre: Judea
- north: Capadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia
- southwest: Egypt, Libya
- west: Rome, Crete
- south: Arabia
- Jerusalem, thus, is the centre *towards which Jesus face and from which the Gospel spreads*

vv. 12-13

- Most likely: Lucan composition.
- Cf. the reaction to Paul in Athens: Also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him, and some were asking, "What does this foolish babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods." (They said this because he was proclaiming the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took Paul and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some surprising things to our ears, so we want to know what they mean." (Acts 17:18–20)
- Thus Luke offers different evaluations reflecting the ambiguity of miracles as such

Message

- Justification of the Gentile mission.

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all those who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were greatly astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, "No one can withhold the water for these people to be baptised, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" (Acts 10:44–47)

- In the tradition, this account is viewed as the birth of the church, the new people of God.
- Who is gathered?
- What is their role?

- How were the empowered for this mission?

Theological themes

- **The Holy Spirit in the life of the church**
- The church in a non-Christian culture
- How to become a Christian
- **The church as the continuation of the plan and purpose of God**
- The relations of Christians to the secular world
- **The unity of the one church**

Thoughts for today

- The Holy Spirit
- Vatican II fifty years on?
- The Joy of the Gospel
- Can we “catch” Pentecost again?

