

### **Prophecy and Dreams – Acts 2:1-21**

Our reading from Acts this morning has to rate as one of the five best-known texts, I think. Mention the word ‘Pentecost’ and just about everyone can make some kind of reference to this text, however fuzzy or vague the reference may be. Many if not most would be able to say something about tongues of fire, and people speaking in tongues, even if their recollection was not very specific about who, and when, and where.

That’s one of the key problems with a “well known” text ... it’s so “well known” that a lot of what is supposedly known really isn’t in the text, and often a lot that is in the text really isn’t known. The understanding, or perhaps more accurately the misunderstanding, of what the incident was about tends to get over-simplified and the details get confused as to what was actually happening. For example, when you think of this incident, do you picture a large group of people assembled, all jabbering away incoherently as if they were drunk? A chaotic scene with confusion reigning everywhere? If that’s the picture that comes to your mind, you are not alone. That is probably the most common view that people hold of this scene – the text tells us that some of those who even watched it happen had the very same thoughts – and yet it is a picture that really doesn’t match the details.

First, how many were there in this incident and who were they? The “they” referred to as being “all together in one place” were the twelve apostles, Mathias having been just added to replace Judas. It was not a huge crowd of strangers upon whom the divided tongues of fire rested, it was the small, intimate group of Jesus’ closest followers. Even the crowd who assembled in response asked, “are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” And as to the jabbering away, it was no incoherent babbling that arose from these people newly filled with the Holy Spirit – they were speaking in languages that people from other nations could readily understand. It seems that some of the apostles were even gifted with being multilingual, as the list of languages / nations – some 15 or so – is greater than the number of apostles! Moreover they were not just babbling, they were speaking about God’s deeds of power. This was not just holy noise that they were generating, they were speaking in such a way as to tell anyone who would listen about God and what God had done.

But some in the crowd didn’t understand what was happening, and as we are told, “sneered and said, ‘they are full of new wine’.” The accusation is clear that these skeptics thought the apostles were behaving like drunken fools. And so to these nay-sayers, and presumably to the rest of the crowd gathered to see what was happening, Peter preached a sermon. At this point I cannot help wondering about a few questions that pop into my mind as well. The crowd to whom Peter preached seems like a large crowd, as we are told that it was made up from the “devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem.” My question is, how did they all fit into the “house in which [the apostles] were sitting” that was filled with the sound like a violent wind? Now I’m sure that literalists will try to explain that by ‘house’ the author here means a large courtyard, or some such, but it still leaves me wondering just how large the crowd of observers actually was. It seems that the practice of overstating attendance at church is not just a modern-day phenomenon!

However, Peter preached a sermon, and apparently a fairly classic form of sermon, quoting heavily from scripture – in this case from the prophet Joel we are reminded, should we the readers not be familiar enough with scripture to recognize the passage. The implication is clear that Peter saw the Pentecost event as a fulfillment of that particular scriptural passage, that the event was the utterance of the prophet Joel coming true. The prophetic reference to the “Spirit being poured out” upon the people, including even the slaves both male and female, is the

clearest connection between the dramatic Pentecost event and the words of Joel, but the rest of it, the part about the sun going dark and the moon turning to blood, seems still a bit unclear.

Even today, the interpretation of prophetic utterances is less than an exact science – indeed such interpretation was never intended to be scientific, and attempts to be so, or to work out with mathematical precision dates and times from prophecies, are doomed from the start. We need to be reminded that prophecy is not, and never was, intended to convey predictions with that kind of date/time accuracy. Prophecy is the act of relating a message from God to the people of God. Let me repeat that, because a proper understanding of prophecy is crucial: prophecy is the act of relating a message from God to the people of God. The prophet is given the message, sometimes in a vision, sometimes in a dream, sometimes in a undeniable urge to speak or act out, often in words or ways that the prophet would rather not say or do. But the key of importance is the message from God – not the accompanying details of emphasis.

Sometime the prophetic message is negative, expressing God's displeasure with the wayward ways of his people. We can think of Micah's words of God's displeasure with the lack of justice being shown by the same people who were outwardly offering expensive sacrifices in religious rituals, and the call to "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." We easily remember those words, but tend to forget what immediately follows: "The voice of the LORD cries to the city (it is sound wisdom to fear your name): Hear, O tribe and assembly of the city! Can I forget the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the scant measure that is accursed? Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights? Your wealthy are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, with tongues of deceit in their mouths. Therefore I have begun to strike you down, making you desolate because of your sins."

Other times the words of prophecy are more positive, such as the familiar "Comfort, comfort ye my people" from Isaiah, beginning a message to the people that God feels their pain, recognizes they have suffered enough, and offers the promise of a smooth and safe return to their homeland where they can once again worship freely.

In both cases, it is the message of God's intent that is of crucial importance, not the supporting details. Peter recognizes that truth here, and focuses upon the central message that the Spirit of God would be poured out on all people, and the events they were witnessing were the fulfillment of that promise.

But there is a second important component to that promise, namely that "your sons and daughters will prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." I spent some time Wednesday morning with the clergy gang from the downtown area, and Peter Eliot, the Dean of the Anglican Cathedral, mentioned that someone had pointed out to him that the middle-aged got left out of this prophesy – the assumption being that the young will see visions, the old will dream, but the middle-aged will be too busy working to have time for either! But hear the underlying promise of grace in this promise of prophesy and dreams: the underlying message is one not of disaster, of frightening portents and omens, but of the gift of hope, the opportunity to vision, and to dream, with the expectation that those visions and dreams could well come true.

And I think that Peter heard and understood and was trying to convey that underlying message of hope and grace as well. He recognized, and was attempting to get the crowd to recognize as well, that the giddy excitement exhibited by the apostles during that momentous Pentecost event was brought about by the fulfillment of the promise from God that his Spirit would be poured out. He was trying to convey to them that in Christ's death and resurrection the

promises of God of grace and mercy and meaning were sealed, and the pouring out of the Spirit was further evidence of that promise being fulfilled.

This incident is for Luke the real beginning of the church. The exciting events of that day and Peter's preaching of a sermon to the assembled crowd was for Luke the starting point of the growth and expansion of the church throughout the whole known world. For Luke it was crucial to point out that the beginning of the church was not a people-event, but a God-event, an event in the holy city of Jerusalem from where the church would expand and grow throughout Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth like expanding ripples on a pond when a stone is thrown in.

And for Luke also the birth of the church was – and could only be – God-inspired, delivered with the arrival of the promised Comforter, Counselor, Advocate, supporter and sustainer, the Holy Spirit delivered as promised by God. Not in isolation, of course, not as a spontaneous and unconnected event, but as the sealing of the new covenant in Christ, the fulfillment of the promise made by the One who was himself the fulfillment of God's promise of mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And here we sit, many years later, also offered the opportunity to hope, to prophesy, to see visions and to dream dreams. What will be our prophecy? What is the message of God that we hear and feel compelled to convey to his people? Can we hear that God cares for all flesh, and offers to pour out his Holy Spirit upon them? Do we see visions of how God is active in the lives of people in our community, and how we might be part of those visions? Dare we dream that we might be called upon to be God's agents of mercy, and justice, and caring, and love in the community and the world in which we live? Dare we act like drunken fools, filled with the Spirit of God, relating to all around us the power of God's deeds? I believe so – do you?