

“Fired Up” – Acts 2:1-21

“Pentecost”: mention the word and most people will at least recognize it – but when you press for a definition not so many will be able to provide a clear answer. Many if not most would be able to say something about tongues of fire or more likely people speaking in tongues, even if their recollection was not very specific about the details of who and when and where. Perhaps more than a few might even be able to make some kind of reference to the biblical text in Acts, however fuzzy or vague that reference may be.

That’s a very common problem with a “well known” biblical text ... it’s so “well known” that a lot of what is supposedly known really isn’t in the text and conversely 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? Do you imagine 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 – and the modern reader is not alone, for the text tells us that some of those who even watched it happen had the very same thoughts – and yet even that is a picture that really doesn’t match the details.

Our first questions regarding those details ask how many were involved 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. (Did you catch that tiny but telling detail: they were sitting at the time?) So it was not a huge crowd of strangers upon whom the divided tongues of fire descended and rested; instead it was the small, intimate group of Jesus’ closest followers. Even the crowd who later gathered because of the commotion 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 clearly and coherently so as to tell anyone who would listen about God and what God had done.

Nevertheless 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, as he was often wont to do, pontificated and preached a sermon. At this point a few more questions pop up in my mind as well. For example, the crowd to whom Peter preached seems like a very 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 as we are reminded from the prophet Joel, 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.

However, what is very clear and what forms the foundation both for today’s celebration and for the church as a whole is the understanding that this event was the acting out of Jesus’ promise to ask God to send the Holy Spirit to uplift and guide his followers. Note carefully the message of God’s intent 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.” A few years ago Peter Elliot, 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! However, I think we need to understand that the age span is meant to be inclusive, representing a wide range of responses across all ages. Whatever your age, hear the underlying promise of grace in this promise of prophesy and dreams: that 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.

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 assuring 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.

Luke sees this incident as 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. Luke felt 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 so here we sit many years later, part of that world-wide church and 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?

When we recognize the importance of the Pentecost event not just for the early church but for us, several more questions arise relating to the Holy Spirit – why do we make use of the Spirit; how do we make use of the Spirit; and when do we make use of the Spirit? First, the 'why' to which there are several answers: because the Spirit is a gift from God, because using the Spirit is a practical way to demonstrate our faithfulness in Christ, and because the Spirit offers us power way beyond what we are capable of in our own right. There is no point in getting into a metaphysical argument here as to whether the Holy Spirit (or God for that matter) exists – this gift is for those who believe!

The second question, the 'how' do we use the Spirit is both easier and harder than the 'why.' Easier, because all we have to do is ask for the help and then step out of the way to let the Spirit work in us; harder, because all we have to do is ask for the help and then step out of the way to let the Spirit work in us. Not only are we all too often reluctant to ask for help, we are seldom content with letting someone else – even God! – to tell us what to do. We love to be in control; we often need to be in control, but surrendering that control to God is the most effective way to let the Spirit work.

And the final question, the 'when' is more personal. Any time you feel you are helpless, or in a situation that you cannot control, that is a great time to ask for God to fill you with and help you be guided by the Holy Spirit. Don't wait for the big catastrophes of life – practice on the smaller stuff but do understand that this is a surrendering of control. We are often inclined not only to ask for God's help but to tell God exactly how we think He should handle the issue. Drawing upon the Holy Spirit is much, much more effective when you simply ask God to intervene and then let yourself be guided into a much better solution.

Perhaps you have already had some positive experiences with calling upon the Holy Spirit, and if so I rejoice with you and I do not need to emphasize what a wondrous sense of connection with God such experiences bring. If you have not yet been able to let yourself go and draw upon the Spirit, then I pray that you soon may do so, in order to feel at least a smidgen of the giddy excitement of the apostles on that first Pentecost day.