

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

ACNA Readings – Genesis 11:1-9; Psalm 104:24-35; Acts 2:1-11(12-21); John 14:8-17

Introduction. Pentecost is upon us and this week's readings have a connecting theme that seems hidden, but like all mining enterprises, we have to dig deeper to find the motherlode!

Common Theme. The theme is of course Pentecost and God bestowing his Spirit on men, but our readings are more diverse than we might expect.

Acts 2:1-21. This account of the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem – 50 days after the crucifixion – is very familiar to us; the narrative is one of the most famous New Testament passages. It's a celebration day in town; in accordance with the command in Deuteronomy 16 for men to gather in Jerusalem to celebrate the three pilgrim feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. People were gathered from across the known world, and we find the first nugget in the list of nations represented in the list - it includes both Jews and Jewish sympathisers – ie converts to Judaism and non-Jews who aligned themselves with the Jewish people. This little passage signposts what is soon to come when the salvation message is thrown open to everyone not just the Jewish people.

What were all those visitors doing there in Jerusalem? They were celebrating the day of Pentecost – originally a mid-season harvest festival when the wheat crop is brought in, but by the time of Jesus, the celebration had come to include thanksgiving for God's gift of the Torah. It is traditionally the day Moses climbed Mount Sinai to collect the ten commandments. That day is not expressly pointed out in the Bible but it was brought together with Shavuot – the Hebrew word for Pentecost – by the Jewish scholars.

What happened that day in Jerusalem was initiated with a powerful reflection of what happened on Mount Sinai – rushing winds, lightning, fire, and loud noises. Just as the Jewish people at the giving of the Law were gathered together in one place, so the disciples in Jerusalem were all in one room. This time instead of being drenched in the law, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to prophesy. Those from around the Jewish world heard them proclaiming in their native languages and many wondered what was happening.

Peter's answer was his famous first sermon. He quotes the prophet Joel who has predicted an outpouring of God's Spirit on many people, young and old, male and female, and servants, accompanied by signs such as were seen both on Mount Sinai and just prior to Peter's teaching. Peter promises that something new is happening – God's blessings just got multiplied and spread further abroad, no longer exclusive to the Jewish community.

Psalm 104:24-35. We find the Psalmist focused on the created world. The Psalm begins with "Bless the Lord O My Soul", a reflexive call to praise and acknowledgement of God. This Psalm is often explained as a reflection of the seven-day creation story, each reference in the song pointing towards some aspect of God's creative work on each day of creation.

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In verses 24 - 34, we find references to the sea and the creatures within it, including men in ships, and we see how they are all dependent upon God for their provision and protection, indeed for their very existence. The key verse brings us back to his Spirit (v.30). When God sends his Spirit out it is creative and sustaining, revealing his glory and his created works. Verse 32 speaks of trembling earth and smoking mountains which should bring to mind Mount Sinai and the giving of the law. When God does something profound and praiseworthy through his Spirit it affects and influences every created thing connected to that act and is advertised by great signs.

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13. This is the chapter where spiritual gifts are described at some length by Paul. It has been used in many parts of the church as a foundational passage encouraging the seeking, acquiring, and use of the supernatural gifts God gives to mankind. In our reading today, though, it is less a manual explaining use of the gifts, but more a reiteration that when God's Spirit comes on people the resulting gifts are available to many for use as a tool to build up the believing community.

Just as one of the foundations of the Jewish people – following the Passover – could be seen as the giving and receiving of the law; therefore, one of the foundations of the church could be seen as the giving and receiving of the Spirit and his accompanying gifts. The big difference is who is eligible to receive the blessing. The Passover and its subsequent effects and blessings were limited to the Jewish people and those who had aligned themselves with the Jews. That alliance was so important that the covenant sign of circumcision was required for a non-Jew to be eligible to join the Passover celebrations. Everyone else was expressly excluded (Exod 12).

When the Spirit comes on Jesus' disciples at Pentecost, the message they proclaim – in all the native tongues of the visitors to Jerusalem – and Peter's exposition of that message makes clear that from that point everyone is eligible to be blessed and receive the spiritual benefits of a relationship with God, not just those from a select group.

John 20:19-23. These few verses from John's gospel draw the previous thoughts together. In the hours immediately after the resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples and offers them peace. Surely the most important gift God has ever bestowed on his creation! They are fearful of the Jewish authorities, hiding behind locked doors, and after their captain has been taken, in desperate need of a spiritual uplift. Jesus offers his peace for a second time, hints that he has a mission for the disciples in line with his own, and finally breathes on them saying "receive the Holy Spirit". This time there is no thunder, lightning, fire, smoke, or trumpets.

Just as when God first breathed life into Adam, the second Adam gently breathes new life into his disciples and explains that forgiveness is the key to their new life. No longer is subscribing to a legal system the route to a covenant relationship with the Creator, but now recognising that Jesus has made a way for God to forgive our sins and that we are to forgive others when they sin against us is all that is required to join. No circumcision, no Law, no genetic link to Israel!

ACNA Readings

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Genesis 11:1-9. This reading pushes back the time, and we are looking beyond the Exodus to the Tower of Babel. Here we find that mankind is still unified and speaking a common language. The results of the fall have set in and men are conscious of their own status and are attempting to raise it above the status of God. They intend to make a name for themselves by building a huge city with a tower that reaches heaven, and because of this, they are dispersed around the world.

The same pride shown by Satan in wanting to be bigger and better than God manifests itself in people. God will not stand for this rebellion and confuses people by making them speak many different languages. This wilful display by proud men is thwarted by a fracturing of their communication systems. This confusion of language is finally reversed on that Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem that we read about in Acts 2.

John 14:8-17. We read about Jesus, this time before his death, promising the Holy Spirit to his followers. He precedes the promise with an explanation of his close relationship with his Father and how this unity reflects the unity that is found in his disciples' – and our – relationship with him. He then promises to those who are in that relationship with him the Spirit of Truth who will be the helper to those who choose to believe but will be unknown to those outside of that relationship.

As we saw in Genesis, God had a plan to redeem the world. For a period of time redemption was only available to Jewish people and their co-covenant allies, but ultimately he wanted all people to be in relationship with him. Acts 2 is the story of that redemption being opened up wide. The other verses serve to underline the importance of the Holy Spirit in our being welcomed into that relationship.

May you all be blessed as you celebrate Pentecost and consider the amazing divine symmetry of the giving of the Law and the giving of the Spirit on this momentous day!

About the author. Paul Hames became a follower of Jesus in 1979 and became Pastor of an independent fellowship in Leicester, England after 17 years in Procurement Management in the UK gas industry. In 2000 he was appointed CMJ's Regional Advisor in the English Midlands. He also spent two years as Deputy Director with Prayer For Israel in the UK. Between 2005 and 2010, Paul and his wife, Janey, managed CMJ Israel's Christ Church Guest House working closely with the Hebrew, English, Romanian, and Arab congregations and the Heritage Centre. Since 2010, he has worked in the UK as part of CMJ's field team with special responsibility for the Bible Comes To Life Exhibition and CMJ's archive heritage, along with representation work in churches, new age outreach, and leading tours to Israel with his wife, Janey. They have three grown-up children and two grandchildren with one more due soon!