

28 May 2023.

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

Reading

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." Acts 2:1-13

Introduction:

Perhaps the simplest way to introduce this Pentecost theme is to ask you to visualise the scene.

The narrow streets of Jerusalem were in those days dominated by the huge temple on which King Herod the Great had lavished his attention, and was regarded as one of the greatest sites of the Roman world, and the Roman battalion's barracks and palace for the governor on his infrequent visits, for this was occupied territory, and the fear of public disturbances was a constant imperial fear in a province like Judea which was so distinctive in its fanatical religiosity. So when any disturbances happened, the regime wanted stability, they wanted to clear the streets, and Roman and Jewish leaders took the same approach.

Having dealt severely with the latest messianic movement (we would call it a cult), they must have been gravely disappointed with what happened so early that morning in the streets around the temple. Suddenly there are inexplicable sounds of wind, bright lights, like a forest fire raging about the place, and then the streets are full of blabbing Galileans, the real hick countrysiders (the Tennesseans of the Jewish world) talking loudly – but in what language? And then the visitors to the city (who are many because it is the time of year for one of the three big celebrations in the temple, the wheat harvest celebration) are sharing notes about the galileans speaking in the noise they are making fragments of the vernacular languages from all over the eastern empire and beyond it. This is a crazy, even disturbing morning.

But these events seem to be a critical occasion, signalling that the crucifixion of the Jesus rebel has not ended the threat from this movement, but, after a lull of 50 days, have started it off on a new cycle.

What sense can we make of this, and can it make any sense to a congregation of Unitarians. Let me suggest that it can.

From Judaism to Christianity

These events marked a very significant transition; a moment in religious history which was momentous in the birth of a separate religious movement, we know as Christianity. Of course this movement looked back to the life of Jesus, who had so recently died, and the events would take the next thirty years to cement in shape. Not until the Jewish people begin the great revolt against the Romans in 66 AD and Christians separate themselves from the rebellion and evacuate Jerusalem. By then the majority of Christians are not Jews but Gentiles, although the leadership is still predominantly Jewish. And from the account of Pentecost one can see a trend, although it takes a while to develop, for the languages that the residents of Jerusalem hear are not Hebrew or the Aramaic vernacular, but innumerable languages of the ancient world. It is a striking phenomenon.

But perhaps the first aspect that people notice is the noisy exuberance of the movement, and the sarcastic reaction of many in the streets: the noisy speakers must be drunk.

Exuberant Religion

It is perhaps an uncomfortable aspect of this Pentecost story, which leaves respectable people, whether they are Unitarians or Anglicans or Buddhists, somewhat troubled. We all like our religion to be respectable, refined, quiet. But a good deal of religion has never been like that. I have the feeling that Europeans of a certain level of religion dismiss anything that gets noisy, and are still inclined to call it drunken behaviour, and incapable of reaching the refined heights which we seek to reach.

But I want to call out this logic, and suggest this is actually a crude and flawed analysis.

Oh I know that Unitarian hymnology since the times of John Greenleaf Whittier has taken this approach:

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace,

And especially the next verse:

Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still small voice of calm.

But even the Unitarians have recognised that this is sometimes a cultural rather than a religious marker. Herbert McLachlan in 1919 wrote a fascinating book about the methodist Unitarian movement. This was a movement among working class people. It combined the critical thinking of Unitarians with the “ranting” style of the methodists. They were from the North-East of Lancashire, and they were poor and they were noisy evangelists led by Joseph Cooke who had converted to Methodism in in the early 1790s, was accepted as a Methodist preacher and served in various parts

of Great Britain until he was kicked out in 1805. He was a very popular preacher, but his heresy was that “a sinner returns to God, according to the requisitions of the Gospel, God accepts that sinner, whether he has any comfortable persuasion of it in his mind or not”. (McLachlan, 18). He was not yet a Unitarian, but his followers built a chapel in Union Street, Rochdale, later called Providence Chapel and then moved to a humbled building, Bethlehem Chapel in Newchurch in Rossendale. Music was provided by a barrel organ, Cooke died in 1811, but Ashworth and Taylor and James Wilkinson continued the movement, with 16 branch societies. Only in 1819 did the Unitarians discover them and were quite surprised at what they found:

“about nine o'clock, when the sun had set and the people could not see to work, six or seven of them came to see and converse with their preacher; most of them were without hats and coats, with their aprons and clogs, and one of them was smoking his pipe. They were all serious, and engaged in religious conversation with great readiness. Religion with them is an affair of the heart and life, not merely, as with many, a speculative inquiry”. [McLachlan 42-43.]

The picture through the book is of poor people whose style was Methodists – loud singing, ranting preaching, but earnest unitarian doctrine. “The Methodist spirit in the Rochdale society clung tenaciously in 1818 to its own forms of expression, and was much too vigorous to suffer extinction within the staid and sober methods, discipline and worship of an old established Unitarian congregation of Presbyterian origin and traditions.” (McLachlan, 52). There was a “Manchester Unitarian Village Missionary Society” which helped finance the movement, although ultimately it died out. Travers Madge, when a student at Hackney College preached among them: “Amongst the Methodist Unitarians with their hearty, country life, their earnest praying ways, their love of vigorous, unconventional, extempore preaching, their capacity for being wrought up into fever and enthusiasm, Travers Madge found himself more at home than in the ordinary type of Unitarian congregation.” (Brooke Herford, Travers Madge pp 22-23 cited by McLachlan p 76). They were Chartists, temperance reformers, labour reformers (including John Fielden of Todmorden/Oldham). They were an influence on the novelist, Elizabeth Gaskell.

I take time over this story, because I think that aesthetics often define the style of religion we think acceptable. But sometimes the appeal – look at black religion – is cultural. The noisy, the popular, need not exclude religion. And indeed, I imagine that the noisiness and coarseness of modern sects and Pentecostalism should not be grounds to reject them. It is interesting that William Jellie, the founder of this church had, before he came to New Zealand been employed by the British and Foreign Unitarian Association to pioneer Unitarianism in a very working-class area of London, but we can well understand that he found this a very tough assignment.

The Spirit on All the Believers

Returning to the story of Pentecost, I am very struck by the way in which every one of the 120 people had a flame upon them and everyone went out to speak in the power that they had experienced. This is strangely different from the way in which the church operated, disempowering laity, disempowering women, disempowering those whose gender and sexuality was unusual. Granted it was Peter who gave the sermon that persuaded people, but it was the ordinary believers who drew the crowd because the spirit of God worked through them.

Thus the notion of the Spirit sitting like flames on every person is a symbol of a new kind of community in which all are endowed with gifts and each is filled with the knowledge of God.

Again these are important themes. Of course, we need learned expert people in our society. But there is also a profound sense that our task is to encourage others to know that they are significant and they matter, and that in a profound sense, a democratic structure is critical to the flourishing of society. But in our age of elitism, I think there has been quite a disempowering of ordinary people.

Discovering Unity in Diversity

The final theme I take to be the discovery of Unity in Diversity. This may take us on an interesting journey into interpretations of the Bible, especially the first testament. You may recall that in the Book of Genesis there are themes of the spirit of God breathing over the waters in the first moment of creation. But then within two chapters firstly Adam and Eve are driven out of the garden of Eden, and paradise is lost, and then the two sons are scrapping, and Cain kills Abel and ends up wandering the earth. Then in Genesis Chapter 11 there is the great plan of the people that they will “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”. (Genesis 11:4) In response the Lord scatters them abroad, and confused their languages, so that there is now no possibility of human unity.

These are significant themes, for in a real way, Pentecost takes up these themes and suggests a hope of human unity. For what the Spirit did as the spirit fell on the assembled group was to enable them to speak the languages of all the peoples of the world. In practice the languages heard were the vernacular languages of the Jewish people who had been dispersed through the world as a result of the fall of Jerusalem in 586 bc. And now, although some had returned to Jerusalem and learned Aramaic (for otherwise how would they have understood Peter’s sermon?), they had a native language as well, which they rarely heard. The named places are distributed in an arc from East to north to west to south:

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs..

Now these are not yet Gentiles – this story is to come later in the Book of Acts. But in fact implicit in this account is the God-given calling to put back together the broken and scattered and exiled peoples of God. Each hears the praise of God in their own language. And the curious thing is that we might imagine reversing the fall and the tower of Babel would be to unite all people in one place at Jerusalem and one language again. But this is not the story. Hearing the praise of God in their own languages they learn that God may truly be worshipped in any language and back in their own places and not just in Jerusalem.

And is this not an important message for our world. We face massive forces of globalisation. Today Peter would of course speak English and his message would be beamed out into the world by electronic means. But this is not the hope of this passage. It is rather the promise that peace and hope comes when we can speak in the native tongue of others, that we can avoid cultural offence in their world, that we will learn understanding and hope. And ideally our churches will do that, not be agents as so often they have been of cultural aggression.

Hymn 123

Spirit of Life, come unto me.

Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.

Blow in the wind, rise in the sea; move in the hand,
giving life the shape of justice.

Roots hold me close; wings set me free;

Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

Hymn 361

Enter, rejoice & come in

Enter, rejoice & come in

Today will be a joyful day,

Enter, rejoice & come in

Open your ears to the song

Open your ears to the song

Today will be a joyful day,

Enter, rejoice & come in

Open your hearts ev'ry one

Open your hearts ev'ry one

Today will be a joyful day,

Enter, rejoice & come in

Don't be afraid of some change

Don't be afraid of some change

Today will be a joyful day,

Enter, rejoice & come in

Enter, rejoice & come in

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Today will be a joyful day,

Enter, rejoice & come in