

Pentecost 2003
"Pentecostal Mission and Identity"
The Rev. Thomas W Simmons IV

There's sure a lot of red up here today! It's a color we haven't seen in a while. In the last several months, there's been purple in Lent and white in Easter. Something special is going on today! It's the day of Pentecost.

Pentecost is the day God pours the Holy Spirit out on the Church. We saw that in our lesson from Acts. The event was so startling and stupendous and created such a spectacle in Jerusalem that thousands gathered to witness it.

What *drew* the crowds were the roaring wind and the flames of fire. These manifestations signaled God's presence and were familiar to folks in Jerusalem because these things always accompanied God's presence, as on Mt Sinai or when Solomon consecrated the Temple in Jerusalem. **God came to his people with fire, smoke and violent atmospheric effects.**

What *kept* the crowds was the spectacle of Jesus' disciples speaking in tongues, proclaiming the great acts of God in languages they had never learned. You see Jerusalem was full of Jewish pilgrims from "every nation under heaven" who had traveled for the feast of Pentecost. They heard the disciples speaking in the languages of their native lands.

But this wasn't simply a spectacle that drew a big crowd. It was an event pivotal in human history that literally changed the world. Pentecost looks both **backward** into the distant mists of the ancient past and **forward** at the far horizon of the future of the human race. Let's explore each this morning and see how we fit into it.

Let's begin by looking into the past. The fact that God's praise is being proclaimed in every language of the known world is significant. It means that **God's word is given not just to one nation Israel but to all the nations.** As we prayed in our Collect this morning, "you opened the way of eternal life to EVERY race and nation by the promised gift of your Holy Spirit."

This is a shift of ancient significance. It goes all the way back to the mists of the ancient past to a great tower that once dominated the plains of Mesopotamia, the Tower of Babel. In the Biblical narrative (and in the ancient traditions of many different cultures) the human race, descended from Noah, was once united and shared a common language and culture.

But these people were bored and restless. They were tired of hearing what had gone on before in the past, the great deeds of their ancestors. They wanted to make a name for *themselves*. They wanted to embark on some great project that would ensure *their* fame for all future generations.

They decided to build a tower, a great pyramid that would climb up into the sky so high that the top of it would reach into heaven itself. And if **they took charge of the stairway to heaven** they wouldn't have to wait around for God, but could take care of things themselves. They could go to God on their own terms and set things right. God meet my lawyer...

And God didn't like where this was headed. He thwarted their defiance and brought them back down to earth. And **to keep humans from uniting again in unanimous opposition** to his reign, God confused their languages, divided them up and scattered them to the four winds.

That's how Genesis explains the great diversity of the human race.

Different family groups set out on their own from the cradle of civilization to make their way in the world, adapting to their environment and developing their own distinctive cultures.

This division and dispersion has been **one of the great unalterable realities of history**. The great empires have tried to reverse this order, to unite the world under god-like emperors. But empires always fall. I think the EU and UN are more humane attempts that haven't quite live up to the promise of their founding. Humans have tried and failed to reverse the effects of the tower of Babel.

But on Pentecost we see God reversing this order. The crowds in Jerusalem heard the great acts of God proclaimed in dozens of languages...one message, many tongues. These voices announced that **God's now reversing the trend of history**, from fragmentation and disunity to integration and union.

Pentecost thus sets the trajectory into the future because God has big plans for the world and for us. On the distant horizon of the future God will complete the great work begun on Pentecost. He's pouring out his Spirit on all flesh, gathering and reuniting the scattered and ethnically and culturally diverse human race into harmony with him and with each other. Imagine that!

He's doing all this through the Church, which was born on Pentecost. Think of the Church as that community of people that embraces all people of every cultural and ethnic and linguistic background. We are gathered together, in all our diversity, to oneness in Jesus Christ, serving God, one another and the world.

That's the most fundamental mission of the Church. The catechism at the back of the BCP - get familiar with it if you haven't already - says, "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."

That's what we pray for. The famous Collect for Mission says, "O God, who made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and didst send thy beloved Son to

preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near: Grant that *people everywhere* may seek after thee and find thee; bring *the nations into thy fold*; pour out thy Spirit upon *all flesh*; and hasten the coming of thy kingdom..."

That's **the vision of the world and the future and the human race** that we get on Pentecost. And that's why we celebrate it every year. And it's interesting that the next season of the calendar is the season of Pentecost. It'll last the next 29 weeks until Advent in early December.

So here we are, located somewhere between that past and that future. What does that vision mean for us? How does this fact influence **who we are, and what we should be doing with our lives?** How should we live?

Jesus gives us an answer in our Gospel reading this morning. Jesus breathed his Spirit into his disciples and said, "As the Father has sent me so I send you."

Jesus gave his disciples...and he gives us...a very simple identity and mission. **We get Jesus' identity and mission.** You see God wants to bring the people of the world back to him. God so loved the world that he wants us all back. So he sent his Son to go get them.

He does this by Building Christians for Service. He started with twelve guys whom he trained and changed and sent into the world *to go and do likewise*. And it's still going on. **Each follower of Jesus is sent as Jesus was.** He sends us out to work with him in bringing in the harvest, gathering the lost sheep, healing the nations, saving the world, one person at a time.

It's built into our spiritual DNA at baptism. In the Baptismal Covenant, which we will renew today, we vow to "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ." We're a sent people, not static. That's why we are Building Christians for Service here at St Peter's; helping each one of you to grow into your unique ways of reaching out to others to share the gifts God has given you.

The joy of Pentecost is that Jesus is powerfully present in his people, living his life in and through us, extending his hospitality to the world. Jesus is calling all the scattered peoples to join him in a great reunion with God. **We are the ones who deliver the invitation and welcome them when they come.** That's the message of Pentecost and we'll be talking a lot about as the season unfolds.
AMEN