Article Side

Pentecost â€“ the party that nobody missed! By David Smith

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"When the day of Pentecost came, all of them were together in one place. Suddenly, a sound like the roaring of a mighty windstorm came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw tongues like flames of fire that separated, and one rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance."

Yes, it's Pentecost again, my friends â€“ my favorite feast of the Christian year!

And I know that the joys of Pentecost tend to be somewhat overshadowed by our other two great holy days â€“ Christmas and Easter â€“ but to my mind, while Christmas and Easter celebrate life and death (and life again) it is Pentecost that celebrates what life is all about â€“ namely, wind and fire and passion!

And you pick this up in the colours of these seasons, which are white for Christmas and Easter but which for Pentecost are red â€“ the colour of blood and hot emotion!

And you pick this up in the Biblical texts that are associated with the events that lie behind our holy days. Whereas the Christmas stories are set in an atmosphere of contemplative wonder, and whereas the Easter narratives lead us from despair to faith and hope, the Pentecost narrative is given to us as a scene of undiluted chaos, with the disciples shouting and carrying-on in such a way that most of the onlookers thought that they were drunk!

And of course you get that immortal defence from St Peter that I reckon was one of those 'it seemed like a good idea at the time' sort of things to say â€“ "these people are not drunk! Itâ€™s only nine in the morning!" (Acts 2:15).

I have a feeling that Peter bit his lip right after saying that. Indeed, I can see James and John and Bart and some of the others saying to him afterwards, "Pete, did you really have to add that quip about opening hours?"

Jesus, as we know, had a reputation as a glutton and a drunkard (Matthew 11:19). It seems that at least this latter part of that reputation was inherited by His disciples.

The disciples, at any rate, were behaving outrageously â€“ singing and shouting and carrying-on like a group of happy larrikins who had had far too much to drink â€“ but it wasn't alcohol that was affecting them on this occasion.

Mind you, I don't want to let this moment pass without taking a quick stab at those who would insist that we serve grape juice instead of wine at the Eucharist.

I remember my preaching mentor, Will Willimon, pointing out that while grape juice is indeed a refreshing (if somewhat insipid) thirst-quencher on a hot day, wine is volatile stuff! It affects not only your palate but your emotions. It can relax, loosen the tongue and arouse amorous feelings, and imbibe too much it and you can end up doing crazy things! Which, he said, sounds more like the Gospel to you?

The disciples, at any rate, are acting in a crazy and excitable fashion when we come across them in Acts chapter 2, but it's not alcohol that has them so full of passion. It's something far greater than

that! It's the spirit of God that is affecting them â€“ that's for sure â€“ but dare we say that it is something far greater than just an ecstatic experience of God that is on display here too?

It's the birthday of the church â€“ the public launch of the Christian community â€“ and that is something that we could all get excited about, and yet there is something even greater on view here.

And we start to pick up what that 'something greater' is when we read and re-read the central part of the narrative in Acts chapter 2:

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabiansâ€“we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." (Acts 2:5-11)

Everybody was there â€“ that seems to be the message â€“ and there was room for everybody there, as each person, regardless of their background or language apparently heard the proclamation of the Apostles in their own tongue!

Everybody was there, and while I won't read through the list of peoples represented again, the list is comprehensive, and if your knowledge of the globe didn't extend much further than that of the average first century Jew, you could be forgiven for thinking that every country and every people in the world was represented there!

Moreover, if you read that list carefully, even from the perspective of a first century Jew, it's hard to believe that all of those people could have possibly been there â€“ most obviously the Medes and the Elamites!

The issue for the Medes and the Elamites was not so much that they would have had to travel a couple of hundred miles to be there, but a couple of hundred years as well, as the kingdoms of Media and Elam were long gone by the first century AD!

Now, whether Luke (the author of the book of Acts) really thought that some of the participants at Pentecost had travelled across time, or whether he was simply choosing to refer to these peoples by their ancient names, the implication is the same â€“ that everybody was there, and that what was taking place that day was certainly of global, if not cosmic, significance!

And I do believe that to see the full picture here we have to look beyond the scene taking place in Jerusalem, and even beyond the ancient kingdoms of Elam and Media that are somehow dragged in there, and look all the way back to an ancient curse that was spoken of at the very beginning of the Bible, and I'm talking of course about the curse of Babel that is spoken of in Genesis 11.

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, letâ€™s make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 11:1-4)

I trust that youâ€™re familiar with the story, as it is a significant story in the Biblical narrative as a whole.

Those who have studied the Bible for any length of time know that the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis are a rather unique unit, containing a sort of 'pre-history' of the people of Israel and of humankind as a whole.

Even if you're not familiar with this particular narrative in Genesis chapter 11, you are nonetheless likely to be very familiar with some of the other ancient stories recorded in the chapters that precede it: Adam and Eve, Cain and Able, Noah and the flood â€¦

As I say, these ancient stories, taken as a group, make up a sort of pre-history of the people of God and of humanity as a whole, and taken as a whole it is a pretty dismal story â€“ the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis â€“ as things just seem to go from bad to worse! What we see indeed in these early chapters is indeed the story of the ongoing degeneration the human race, where humanity seems to be caught in an unbreakable spiral of tragedy and violence.

The cycle begins with Adam and Eve, who fail miserably to fulfil their calling as responsible custodians of The Garden. Things then get worse with their children, Cain and Abel, where the older brother murders the younger, and from there on things just continue to degenerate until we reach the point in Genesis 6 where we are told that "The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth" (Genesis 6:5-6a). And so begins the story of the terrible flood that threatened to wipe out the entirety of humanity, but where Noah and his family are saved.

And then there is one more story â€“ the Babel story of Genesis 11 â€“ where people band together to build a great tower and so 'make a name for themselves'.

And it seems that this story, from a Biblical point of view, is the bottom of the spiral of human degeneration â€“ where human beings are now deliberately banding together to build a community for themselves that excludes the presence of their creator.

And just as this is seen as the worst of all possible sins, so the punishment meted out to these people is seen as being the worst of all possible curses â€“ namely, that their languages are confused so they can no longer communicate with each other.

This may seem initially counter-intuitive. I suspect that you, like me, would rather be subject to the curse of Babel than to the curse of the flood, where everybody drowned, but it is significant that from a Biblical point of view it is the breaking up of the nations and the consequent legacy of disunity, tension, miscommunication, prejudicial violence and racism that is the greatest curse to ever afflict humanity!

I've made this point many times, yet I'll make it again today: we tend to think of things like 'multi-culturalism' and the 'White Australia Policy' as being secular, political issues! No area of concern is more spiritual, from a Biblical point of view, than the coming together of people of difference races and language-groups.

They were all torn apart at Babel but everybody was there at Pentecost where indeed the very curse of Babel was put in reverse!

Just as God is pictured at Babel as coming down and confusing the languages, so God descends at Pentecost and starts to miraculously unscramble those languages! Just as so those who had sought to 'build a name for themselves' had their aspirations destroyed at Babel, so the Spirit of God comes at Pentecost and makes a name for Herself through the building of a community where race and language and colour and culture no longer divide and separate.

Just as the human community had been confused and pulled apart through linguistic diversity way back at Babel, so now the Spirit of God heals those divisions and starts bringing the races and language groups back together in the founding of the church as a truly multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic community!

Everybody was there at Pentecost, and everybody started to come back together there, and the disciples start to get excited, and I find I get excited too! The disciples start behaving like people

who have had a bit too much to drink, and if you ever see me behaving like I've had too much to drink, that's my excuse too! OK?

In all seriousness, I do get a great thrill when I look out here on a Sunday morning and see a sea of faces representing a variety of nations and language groups. It warms my heat as I believe it warms the heart of God as it testifies to the fact that genuine human community really is possible.

I've mentioned many times that favourite verse of mine from Ephesians 3, where St Paul talks about the 'manifold wisdom of God' that is being broadcasted through the church right through to rulers and authorities in Heavenly places (Ephesians 3:10), where the word 'manifold' literally translates as 'multi-coloured'!

When we see that sea of friendly faces â€“ European and Asian and Indigenous Australian and African â€“ we see something of the multi-coloured wisdom of God in that, and when we genuinely start to manifest that multi-coloured unity, we find that we are participating in something of cosmic significance â€“ we are broadcasting that multi-coloured wisdom of God to principalities and powers in the Heavenly places!

Don't believe it when they tell you that cross-cultural communication has its limits. Don't believe it when they say that you are from different worlds and so can never truly understand one another. Don't trivialise the significance of cultural diversity of course, but dont underestimate God either â€“ who, since the Day of Pentecost, has been in the business of bringing once estranged people and groups together!

Everybody was there at Pentecost â€“ a day of fire and passion â€“ and now we are there too, getting a foretaste of that truly inclusive human community that awaits us â€“ a community where there is no rich, no poor, no slave, no free, no Jew, no gentile, no black, no white, no Australian, no refugee, no straight, no gay, no male, no female, but where Christ is in all and through all and for all!

This is Pentecost, and if you donâ€™t find it enflaming your passions then itâ€™s time to ask the Spirit of God to start a fire under you!

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If you don't find it enflaming your passions then it's time to ask the Spirit of God to start a fire under you! 'Fighting Father' Dave - Parish Priest, Community Worker, Professional boxer, Martial Arts master, Father of three. Dave's goal is to offer an alternative culture for young people, based on values of courage, integrity, self-discipline and teamwork. He is available to help work your corner as you fight the good fight. Visit a http://www.fatherdave.org for more information.

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