

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

Sunday, June 4, 2017

Rev. Andrew Reid

Acts 2:1-21; I Corinthians 12:4-13; John 20:19-23

“Spirit living”

Pentecost. Something with a rich depth of meaning in Scripture, for Christians and for Jews. Several points to keep in mind.

In the Jewish tradition, the feast of Pentecost – or Shavuot, in Hebrew – is a harvest celebration, a one-day festival marking the end of the spring wheat harvest. In Exodus 34:22, it is referred to as the festival of weeks because it is celebrated a week of weeks, or 50 days, after Passover. Which explains why it is called Pentecost in English: the name comes from comes from the Greek word Πεντηκοστή, which means fiftieth, because it was celebrated 50 days after Passover.

The festival is also called the festival of harvest in Exodus 23:16, and the festival of first fruits in Numbers 28:26. In later rabbinic tradition, Pentecost was linked to the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. For that reason, it was an important date in Jewish religious observance: Passover, Pentecost and the feast of Tabernacles were the three times in the year when Jews were expected to make the pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem.

In Christian tradition, Pentecost also has several meanings. It is, of course, the day when the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus’ followers gathered in Jerusalem for the festival, when a violent wind blew, and tongues of fire danced around, and people began to speak in languages that they had never spoken before. Thank you to those of you who took me up on my challenge to wear red today, the colour of the tongues of flame.

Pentecost has also been called the birthday of the church. It certainly was the point when a profound change occurred in the life of Jesus’ followers.

Up to that point, they were a confused, unsure bunch. Actually, it maybe a bit unfair to put it that way. After all, they were doing just what Jesus had told them – *I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high* Luke 24:49. After Jesus had left them on Mount Olivet, they had returned to Jerusalem and devoted themselves *constantly to prayer* Luke 1:14. They had taken steps to find a replacement for Judas Iscariot to bring their numbers back up to 12 when *the lot fell on Matthias* Acts 1:26. Beyond that, they had stayed in the city. And waited.

Then came the day when *all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit* Acts 2:4. And things started happening. They *began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability* Acts 2:4. People of all those nations that Steve managed to get his tongue around – Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Cyrene, Rome, Cretans and Arabs – in their own languages, they all heard the Galilean disciples *speaking about God's deeds of power* Acts 2:9-11.

They even heard Peter, standing with the eleven, raising his voice and proclaiming that “*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*” Acts 2:14,21.

And from that moment on, life for the followers of Jesus was profoundly different. Suddenly they had a purpose to fulfil: to speak about God's deeds of power, all that God had done for humanity in Jesus Christ.

Oh, they would still have their disagreements and differences. There would still be things they had to work out amongst themselves. But reaching above and beyond all that, they had a shared purpose, one that brought them together and gave them common ground to work on. They had a shared purpose which they could all serve in their different ways with their different gifts and skills. They were now, in St Paul's words to

the Corinthians, one body in the one Spirit, with different gifts to be used as manifestations of that Spirit. All because they were now Spirit living.

So that's what Pentecost and Spirit living meant for the disciples back then. How do we see Spirit living being worked out among us who are followers of Jesus Christ here in New St James today? I believe we can see it in several ways, though being self-effacing Presbyterians, maybe we tend to overlook some of them.

One is in the number of countries represented when we gather to worship God together. St Luke records people from 16 different nations present in Jerusalem to witness the events of the first Christian Pentecost. I don't remember exactly when I did it, but there was a Sunday not long ago when I counted people from 16 different nations present here in New St James. Happy coincidence? Maybe. Or maybe it's the work of the Spirit creating one body with many members. Thank you to those of you who took me up on my challenge to wear something that reflects your national or ethnic background.

For some of our sisters and brothers in Christ, Spirit living means speaking in tongues, and performing miracles, and being baptised in the Spirit. Which is one way to look at it. But there are others.

In today's text from 1 Corinthians, St Paul talks about *varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit . . . varieties of services, but the same Lord . . . varieties of activities, but the same God who activates all of them in everyone* 1 Corinthians 12:4-6. In the current issue of The New Connection, you will have read the report of the 12 Keys Action Plan Mission Group. Amongst other things, that report lists the various mission ministries that people from New St James are involved in – all 82 of them. Varieties of gifts, services and activities, all exercised under the activation of the same God.

In Galatians 5, St Paul talks about what he calls “the works of the flesh,”

and he contrasts them with what he calls “the fruit of the Spirit.” His list of the fruit of the Spirit includes nine things: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Anyone who has spent any time with people from New St James will have seen many, or more likely all, of these shown in a variety of ways. I want to thank all of you – I want to honour all of you – for the ways in which you show God’s deeds of power today. May the Spirit who came down at Pentecost continue to strengthen you as you respond to God’s call to follow Christ, to worship God and to serve others.