

Pentecost Sunday, May 24, 2015, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Acts 2:1-11

"The Transforming Gift of the Holy Spirit"

Today is truly a day of remembrance! We honor the work of people who laid down their lives with boldness, solely for the generations that were to come – protecting the faith and freedoms given by Almighty God. We think about and remember those members of the Armed Forces, those men and women who gave their lives – and we thank them with all our heart – on this Memorial Day weekend. We also remember the Apostles – who on the Day of Pentecost received the Holy Spirit and were blessed with a boldness to bring the Good News – the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world – and laid down their lives – without hesitation – so that the faith once delivered would be passed on. We remember and thank them today as we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost and the deliverance of the Holy Spirit. We celebrate the birthday of St. Andrew's Anglican Church – who on Pentecost Sunday two years ago, came into being and took the faith once delivered by Almighty God to the Apostles to be unchanged and untarnished to the world. We celebrate all these things today!

To the first century Jew, neither Passover nor Pentecost were simply agricultural festivals but instead awakened echoes of the great story which dominated the long memories of the Jewish people, the story of the Exodus from Egypt, when God fulfilled his promises to Abraham by rescuing his people. Passover was the time when the lambs were sacrificed, and the Israelites were saved, by the blood of the lamb, from the Angel of Death who killed the firstborn of the Egyptians. The Israelites fled Egypt that very night, passing through the Red Sea into the Sinai desert. You might be saying "what has this got to do with Pentecost?" Fifty days after the Exodus, after Passover, they came to Mount Sinai, where Moses received the law from Almighty God. Pentecost, or "*Shavuot*," the fiftieth day, isn't just about the 'first fruits' of the harvest. It's about God giving to His redeemed people the way of life by which they must now carry out His purposes. For Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, he assumed that most people would know about the first fruits and of the apostles being filled with the Holy Spirit and then their going on to bear powerful witness of Jesus and His Resurrection, winning 3,000 converts from the very first day, when Peter spoke to the crowd, giving to us a sign of the great harvest that would come.

When the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, Moses went up the mountain, and then came down again with the Law. For us, Jesus has gone up into heaven in His ascension, and we as Christians understand that He is coming down again, not with a written law carved on tablets of stone, but with the dynamic power of the law, meant to be written on human hearts! 'Pentecost' is a word with very particular meaning, - the first day of Pentecost and the experience of God's Holy Spirit from that day to this should not be reduced to "academic theological formulas" similar to which you can reduce a hurricane to a list of diagrams on a meteorologist's chart. Sure, somebody somewhere is tracking the hurricane and telling us what it's doing, but when it comes to Pentecost it's far more important that we're out there in the wind, letting it sweep through our lives, our hearts, our imaginations, our powers of speech,

and transforms us from a listless or lifeless believer into someone whose heart is on fire with the love of God!

The Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost happens as the direct result of the ascension of Jesus. Because He is the Lord of all, His energy and His power is available through the Holy Spirit to all who call on Him, all who follow Him, and all who trust in Him. The experience of the wind rushing through the house with a great roar, and the tongues of fire coming to rest on each person present, must have been both terrifying and exhilarating. Incredibly, the word for Spirit is "*Ruach*", which means wind. You say you cannot see the Holy Spirit – but you cannot see the wind either. You say you can see the effects of the wind and I say you can see the effects of the Holy Spirit! Thanks be to God! Incredibly, people sometimes feel guilty if they think they haven't had such wonderful experiences as the apostles had on the first Pentecost or maybe they feel jealous of others who seem to have had things like this happen to them. Remember, God moves mysteriously among His people, dealing with each individual person in a different way. Just as each one of us has different identities; we have different fingerprints which make us unique. Scripture says that He even knows the number of hairs on our head. Our relationship with God is personal! Some people are allowed remarkable experiences, maybe because they are going to experience difficult situations in their lives or they need to know very directly just how dramatically powerful and life-transforming God can be. Other people have to work in quiet and patient ways and not rely on a sudden burst of extra power to fix all the problems – because in fact they need a steadier, and much deeper, work. Please understand this - there is no room for pride or jealousy – we should be as delighted with the gifts given by God to others as with those given to us by God. It is clear from words of Jesus himself "*If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*" (Luke 11:13) **God longs to give the Holy Spirit to people, and that all we have to do is ask.** What the Holy Spirit will do when He comes is anybody's guess. We have to let God be God! We might as well be prepared for wind and fire, or even for some fairly drastic cleaning up of the dusty and cold rooms of our life. But we should NEVER doubt that God will give His Holy Spirit to all who seek Him, and that the form and direction that any Holy Spirit filled life will take will be to enable that person to bring glory to God. I have told you many times that God is a gentleman. He will not force Himself on anyone – He waits patiently for us to give Him permission, and once we have given Him permission - stand back – your life will never be the same!

I just love that somehow, supernaturally, on the day of Pentecost, no one needed translators! Everybody understood what the Apostles were saying in their own language. What language would they have been expecting? At that time, all around the Mediterranean world, everybody's second language was Greek. Ever since the conquests of Alexander the Great, 400 years earlier, Greek had been to much of that world what English is for many people in the world today. People who travelled, as the people in this Bible account seem to have done, would be able to get by in Greek, and they probably spoke at least one other language. Jews in Judea would know and speak Aramaic, but some might also know some classical Hebrew as well. Others would know at least some Latin, since the Roman Empire imposed itself on many of the

countries that were originally conquered by Greece. But on that day of Pentecost they didn't need to switch languages, or to worry about translation. It was all miraculously done for them!

People are often surprised by this taking place. Many have seen 'the gift of tongues' not as the gift of being able to speak other specific languages, but rather as the having a kind of heavenly babble, that may sound like a language. For many devout Christians who 'speak in tongues' as part of their prayer language, there is no expectation that anyone will 'understand' what they are saying, as if I suddenly spoke Arabic in a crowded bus in Jerusalem. There would be many people who would understand what I was saying. This amazing miracle of understanding what the Apostles were saying was God's fulfilling His promise to extend His kingdom – outside of Jerusalem. His saving, sovereign rule, **not only in Israel but through Israel**, would reach the rest of the world. This was how God was going to fulfil what He had said to Abraham in Genesis 12.3: *'In you, and in your family, all the families of the earth will be blessed.'* This promise to Abraham comes directly after the people of Babel built a tower to reach heaven, arrogantly trying to make a name for themselves and what was God's response? God confused their languages so that they could no longer understand each other.

St. Luke, in Acts, gives the list of where these people on the Day of Pentecost came, covering tens of thousands of square miles, from Parthia and Mesopotamia in the north and east - to Rome in the west and Egypt and Arabia in the south, including the island of Crete. The point is not to give an exact list of precisely where everyone came from in the crowded city of Jerusalem that day, but to show the sense of a large "melting pot" of all who are hearing words spoken in their own language. It must have sounded like the slurred and babbling speech of people who have had too much to drink. This Second Chapter of Acts is the turning point for the church. God sent His Holy Spirit to transform and to strengthen His leaders – to preach about Jesus and to in turn change lives – eternal lives! That is why we call Pentecost the "birthday" of the church. These 12 men would be forever changed – who would now truly be Fishers of men – of Mankind!

Throughout the Book of Acts there is opposition, disbelief, scoffing and sneering by people at what the apostle's say and do, even persecution and death, but at the same time there is great success and conviction. Look at the work of the church, since then and to this very day, there are always plenty who look at true Christians and think that we are wasting our time and talking nonsense. We have seen people on TV talk about Christians with a sneer, with a chortle, with a laugh. Standing firm for the "faith once delivered" has sometimes brought opposition, disbelief, scoffing and sneering – and yes, even persecution and death. The only way to deal with this is to call upon God Himself, in the Person of His Holy Spirit – to give us His special Gifts – with strength to endure, a boldness to stay the course, wisdom to lead, a passion for the Word of God and to teach it – **unchanged** – to those around us; that is one of the reasons that we have Pew Bibles now, so that we can refer to the Word of God – as it was written, not as it was changed to other different words. It gives us the opportunity to spread the Word to those around us and to give all of the Glory, honor and Praise to Him and Him alone.