

Language—More Than Words

When we hear the word Pentecost our thoughts immediately go to that celebration of the Jewish Pentecost festival which is recorded in the Book of Acts. We view Pentecost as a Christian celebration and consider it the birth of the Christian church. Since the coming of the Holy Spirit is the power which moved the disciples out of hiding and into giving the message of Christ in the public square—and that event is recorded by the author of Luke as happening on the Day of Pentecost—we often overlook that it was already named that. Nowhere in the gospels is the Day of the Lord's resurrection named Easter—that came later. So it is important that this festival already carried a name, the Festival of Weeks in Hebrew Scripture and Jewish tradition. It was established early as a day to bring offerings in thanks for the wheat harvest. Because of the festival's timing it became known in Greek as Pentecost—fifty days after Passover. It is because of this long established festival—a pilgrim festival—many people have again gathered in Jerusalem at this time—from all those areas in which the Jewish Diaspora lived. According to the text every nation under heaven is represented there. They have come into Jerusalem to observe a high holy day of their faith—not to discover that their entire understanding of that faith is about to be uprooted with the proclamation that the long awaited Messiah has come and his coming did not fulfill their expectation, but God's purpose. The listing in Acts of all those nationalities represented is interesting because included are some whose homelands had enmity toward one another, whose people and cultures were at odds. They had a shared belief in Yahweh, but little else in common. The disciples' proclamation begins in a manner that bewilders the gathered crowd—they have come out into the crowd and have begun to proclaim the gospel news—the news foretold by the prophet Joel that God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh. The first recorded response of the crowd is: "Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?'" We often view this as a type of reversal of the narrative found in Genesis about the Tower of Babel. In that story the universal language was no longer understood by everyone and because of that lack of communication the people scattered. Galilee in Judea was a poor region in the province whose residents were unlikely to be educated or able to speak anything other than their native tongue. Those visiting Jerusalem from afar would have likely been both educated and wealthy—able to understand or at least recognize and identify people whose dress and languages differed from their own. If you read the verse carefully you find that it does not tell us that the disciples were speaking using different languages, but what was happening was an understanding by those surrounding them of what was being said—"how is it we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" They also realized that all those present, even those from other places and cultures were also hearing the same message. And what they heard was the message about God's deeds of power. It did not matter that the air was full of different words, there was one message and the disciples were given the task of spreading it. I am a devoted listener to WFAE and NPR when in the car. Last week on Morning Edition there was a segment following on the concerns of President Trump's overseas visits and interactions with foreign leaders. This particular segment was on the challenges of translating his speech into a foreign language—in particular Farsi, the language of Persia and the Arab world. The BBC's Persian service host was interviewed spoke about the difficulty of translating Trump's speech which uses many American

idioms into words which convey the same meaning. The example he used was the idiom “showboat”. A possible literal translation would be “attention seeker”, but that doesn’t like something that Trump would actually say. The issue is to match the literal translation to the other associations of the word. Translation requires careful attention to context, both that of the speaker and the hearer. The implication, the tone, and even the pauses and filler words, which the translator pointed out, are used a lot by President Trump are important in an accurate translation. All these things must be considered and translated if the meaning is to be correctly conveyed. Confusion abounds when a literal word-for-word transcript is given and, as the saying goes, something important is “lost in translation”. These factors which point out in today’s terms that language is more than words. What is being described in this passage according to Willie James Jennings in his new Commentary on Acts¹ is “the followers of Jesus are now being connected in a way that joins them to people in the most intimate space—of voice, memory, sound, body, land and place. It is language that runs through all these matters. It is the sinew of existence of a people. My people, our language: to speak a language is to speak to a people.” Jennings points out “God speaks people, fluently” and God desires Christ’s disciples “to speak people fluently too.” The message about the God’s great deeds of power is based on what connects them. That is the miracle of Pentecost. It is this radical joining of people which is not really as much about new revelations as it is about new relationships. Those Jews gathered from every nation are hearing about God’s deeds of power in their own language, as if these strangers from Galilee spoke each person’s mother tongue. And it isn’t so much the message that they don’t comprehend, it is the meaning of this message being conveyed to them with every nuance of their own language from those they know don’t know them or their language. Some question the meaning of this which in itself is a powerful act of the Spirit—some just scoff. But the scoffers are answered by Peter with the connection to tradition long held through their scripture. This chapter begins with the wind and flame, continues with the words and speech that took everyone by surprise—the disciples and the gathered crowd alike. There is a knowing which occurs that opens the door to relationship—a Spirit-driven, Spirit defined, relationship that transcends the barriers of culture and nation and language but does not erase their distinctiveness or importance. The Spirit celebrates the myriad of languages by speaking through them all—not forcing everyone to speak the native language of the apostles, but instead putting the message into the language that each understood. That’s the miracle we need repeated in our time and place. As our response to the confession of our waywardness we sing “Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.” Remember just what happened to those fearful men huddling in that room when God’s Spirit arrived with a roaring wind and tongues of flame. It wasn’t only that they were able to speak words and have them understood by those of many different cultures, it was that their previous way of living was no longer a possibility. They could not go back to what they had known before, return to the simple life of a fisherman for example. Before the Spirit’s arrival it would have been possible that they might return to the life they had before Jesus called them. The signs we are given from Acts are all mighty, powerful symbols. That is fitting as the Holy Spirit is God’s own Spirit, the very Spirit of the resurrected Jesus—now on earth to be our companion. But we

¹ Jennings, Willie James in Belief series: Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible. WJK Press (2017).

must also recall that the promised Holy Spirit is the presence of the crucified and resurrected Christ. This brings home the fact that with God we should never expect things to be exactly easy or like we would prefer. In the cross of Christ, we see God's strength mediated through suffering, God's victory achieved through defeat, and new life pledged and provided through death. God and God's ways are beyond our understanding. Since The Holy Spirit's arrival actually made it impossible for the disciples to return to their former life, this arrival did not make their life easier—but it did provide strength and courage. Although not as dramatic narration of the arrival of the Holy Spirit the passage from John's gospel speaks to me. When Jesus appears to the disciples in that locked room he tells them: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Throughout Scripture God's presence is marked and described as wind and breath. In our lives, God's presence is marked by the new life which is breathed into us through the Holy Spirit; new life which can embolden us to go when and where God sends us; new life which can enable us to move beyond differences into the understanding of God's love which enfolds all. Thanks be to God.