

Pentecost Sunday 2010

Acts 2:1-21

John 13:31-35

Today is Pentecost. It's a somewhat confusing day for me since, as I get older, I revert more and more to my childhood, and when I was a child, this was Whitsunday. I remember it as such (and the color of the day was white rather than red) and this Pentecost stuff always feels a bit like an innovation. I say that to let you know that I, too, can be prickly about innovations.

Today's readings give two strikingly different accounts of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the apostles. One account, in Acts, is complete with plenty of spectators, miraculous occurrences, great confusion among the onlookers. It's a mysterious public spectacle. Then Peter gets up and explains it all. In John's account we see a private occurrence, apparently just the twelve, or rather the eleven + Peter. The whole process is quiet, almost domestic in tone. Jesus breathes on the disciples, gives them some advice and that's all there is to it.

More central to the difference is that in Acts the gift of the Spirit is pictured as happening in a gathered community. Everyone from the whole known world is gathered in Jerusalem. But in John the disciples are sent to the dispersed parts of humanity. In one picture, everyone comes to one place and there God is made manifest. In the other, the manifestation of God sends everyone to the four corners of the earth. It's a striking difference in flow.

So we have radically different accounts of the gift of the Spirit. There are two ways of accounting for them. The way I'm used to involves all sorts of special pleading, historical and literary gymnastics, to establish that we are talking about two different events and so the differences between them need not bother us. I'm skeptical of this approach. Anytime one needs to do violence to the biblical text in order to get an interpretation one is on soggy, risky ground and likely to sink into the morass. I think the proper explanation is that the authors of Acts and of John have different things to say. Each is using the gift of the Spirit episode to talk about different aspects of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church. The proper mode of interpretation, the proper direction, is to inquire as to what the message of each separate author might be, then, if you want to get fancy, you can try to put the two messages together and seek a theological unity. But if there is a unity it's likely to be in the theology and not in the history.

Today's objective is to identify the intentions behind the stories. What is it about the Spirit in the church that Acts wants to say? That John wants to say? I will close with a nasty and cautionary word about this business of sins being forgiven and sins being retained. Too many of my colleagues have used that passage as an avenue to power. That needs to stop.

Let's look at the Acts account. What seems key is the presence of all these people from the four corners of the earth and that they hear the word of God being proclaimed, at the same time, in their own languages. That's what is emphasized in the text: the parts of the world are named. We're used to the idea of Bible translation – after all, we constantly use one. I don't read the

Bible (much) in Koine Greek. So we tend not to appreciate how peculiar the status of translation is. Look at our companion religions, Islam and Judaism. In both there is a greater emphasis than with us on knowledge of the tongue in which the revelation is supposed to have occurred. Both present the idea that God uses a language.

For Islam, the Koran is not the Koran if it's not in Arabic. No translation of the Koran, and this is the point, has the authority of the Koran in Arabic. Even in Judaism, which isn't quite so straightlaced about it, the proper foundation for understanding scripture is the Hebrew text. To be an adult means, in theory, to be able to read that text. We have no requirement that in order to be a confirmed, adult Episcopalian, one has to be able to read Old Testament in Hebrew and New Testament in Greek. You may all be thankful.

Somehow, in Christianity it's different. And we have this story in Luke in which God himself speaks everyone's language. If Christian scripture is translated into Eskimo or Tierra del Fuego it's still one of the authoritative foundations for the church's life. This has spawned a huge scholarly effort to translate the Bible into every imaginable language. If a language doesn't have a written form, scholars will make one in order to be able to translate the Bible into it. The last book we received for the St. Anselm library was a translation of the New Testament into Hawaiian Pidgin. I've got it upstairs, it's quite amusing. But it is also a serious scholarly translation.

This has some profound implications. First, in Christianity we do not require an especially educated class, knowing the original languages, in order to properly understand and interpret the world of God. Whatever your language, it can be done in that language. Now some of us are a little hoity-toity about this and think it's good to have an occasional person around who knows the original just to check things out. But Luke makes it quite clear that God speaks not through a particular language in a written text, but he speaks through the message preserved and proclaimed by means of the life of the church. The scriptures are not a book of God's revelation off by itself, but the scriptures are the church's book, in which what God has to say to and on behalf of the church is recorded. The church has the responsibility of interpretation, proclamation, education – the passing on and living out of that message.

I have sometimes told my students – to some incredulity on their part – that if we hadn't had a history of continuous interpretation of the New Testament, and it were suddenly discovered as an ancient manuscript, that it would be nearly incomprehensible. The only reason the Bible is comprehensible is the continual teaching, preaching, explanation, passing on, that constitutes a good part of the life of the church. This is one reason for my queasy stomach. A good number of my students possess not just a low level of Biblical knowledge, but also an absence of any sophisticated idea of how to interpret a text other than literally. This, I think, cuts at the foundation of the church's ability to pass on its message.

Second, Luke believes that the Christian message happens on the edges. In his gospel "Galileans" mean the people who are on the edge, the folks on the edge of respectability, the folks who do not live where proper religion is practiced. The journey from Galilee to Jerusalem is a journey into religious propriety and is also a movement toward destruction. Galilee is

Galilee of the Gentiles, the place where the Hebrew message gets mixed up by all those strange people from other places. Next door is the Decapolis, and, as we are finding out from excavations of its cities, it was quite a pagan place: frescos of Greek and Roman gods in the villas. Galilean synagogues had images in their mosaics. The Judaism of Galilee was a bit different.

Luke is fascinated by the idea that Galilee is a place where things mix. It's a frontier place. This is where God's message is proclaimed, heard, understood. Look to the edges of things!

That would tend, I think to confirm Luke's idea that God speaks in everyone's language. The barbarians hear his word. That's just one little point about what is going on in Acts. For better or worse, the whole Christian world has received Luke's perspective that all languages can express the truth about God. It is the gift of the Spirit which identifies the community.

Now, John. In that reading we find a peculiar passage in which Jesus says to his disciples, after they have been given the Holy Spirit, "If you retain anyone's sins, they are retained; if you forgive them they are forgiven."

This has traditionally been interpreted as a grant of authority to the clergy. It's no such thing. To believe that the 12 apostles were the first clergy strains my historical credulity past the breaking point. I see no historical evidence for any such supposition. If one is going to say that the 12 apostles are the origin of anything, they ought to be the origin of the laity. There are no priests for the next couple of hundred years.

More to the core, when Jesus speaks to his disciples he usually warns them about the dangers of being the church. Grants of authority are not style. Look at his reaction to the Sons of Thunder wanting to sit at his right hand and his left in the kingdom. That's how he reacts to people who want power from him.

I think it's a warning. Jesus is saying, "I have given you the task of my body, of my life, which is reconciliation. If you retain people's sins, if you do not engage to the extent you can in reconciliation, then the creation remains unreconciled. And you have failed. You have not honored the body you claim to be." Period. That's a warning. Be about your assignment!

A final word, also singing to the choir. Reconciliation is a complex activity. I've seen forgiveness used as a tool of aggression too many times to have much trust in mere language about reconciliation. When someone says to me, "I forgive you." frequently it means they don't want to deal with the real problem. If I forgive you, you can't, in decency, bring up the situation again, no matter how unresolved it is. It is, at the core, an act of spiritual aggression.

Also, reconciliation is, most of the time, partial. Sometimes one can move so far and no farther toward healing. Sometimes there are people or institutions with which relationships ought not to be mended. We are not, for instance, to reconcile with injustice. And that means caution. After all, we do not recognize injustice every time we see it! To bring this to a more mundane level, I did something recently I don't often do and which I don't like to do. I flunked a

student. A straight out and out earned F. There is no reconciliation possible in this situation which does not involve radical change in the student. The same thing is true in the ordinary Christian life. Reconciliation is not a simple matter of saying, "We're going back to the way it was before we had trouble." That doesn't work. What has happened has become part of eternity and will not go away. The only thing which can be done is to figure out how to build something positive on whatever the negative foundation is. The promise of grace is that God can build love on whatever foundations we offer to him. This is what will be going on in the Eucharist today. We offer God whatever there is of us, whether we're aware of it or not, that's not for publication. If God is God that's what he needs to be working with. There's no point to working with our successes. Working with our failure, working with our weakness, working with our anxiety, working with our denials is something else. That's what grace and the love of God are about. The divine intent for us is that love be built on our failure, our rejections, even our hate.

Be patient about our stunted abilities to reconcile with each other. Consider the length of time it takes us to reconcile with God. God and I have been at it most of my life and it doesn't feel anywhere near done yet. I don't see why God's reconciliation with me ought to be any simpler than my reconciliation with anyone else. So forgiveness is not an event which happens among other events in the Christian life. Forgiveness is a boundary condition, a goal, toward which Christians strive to move in all relationships. It's one of those goals which is never reached. And it's far better to begin with no expectation of completion than never to begin at all. It's rather like education in that way – I'll never know all there is to know about theology, or even all I ought to know or need to know to do my job, but it's a lot better to have started learning than not to have started at all.

OK. So that's all I've got to say about Pentecost and such like things. Please stand for the creed.