

## "The Power of Life Takes Effect!"

Psalm 104:1-4, 24-30; Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15; Acts 2:1-21.

St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, Hamilton, Pentecost, May 27, 2012

A rush of wind, a rush of *violent* wind, in a house, the house where Jesus' disciples were gathered. It blew their hair, whipped at their clothes, picked up objects and blew them across the room. And when in this house there arose such a clatter, everyone came running to see what was the matter!

Tongues of flame appeared, burning among the disciples, and licked out to touch each one. And they began to speak of God's mighty act in Jesus Christ, of all they had heard and seen these past momentous weeks – but in other languages, these ordinary, uneducated and, no doubt, unilingual people of Galilee!

So those who had come running to see what was the matter, who were Jews from all over the Roman Empire, on account of the forced dispersions of the Jews in previous centuries, heard the good news in their own native languages.

You see, Jews from far-flung parts of the Empire no longer spoke Hebrew or Aramaic, for they grew up speaking the local languages of these places, as well as Greek, the common language of the Empire. Perhaps, to their dismay and embarrassment, they spoke Hebrew, or the related and more common Aramaic, badly, if at all.

But now, native Aramaic speakers were speaking their languages, as if what they were saying were addressed personally to each in his or her native tongue! And what they were saying, such amazing things about God, and his gracious, saving love! What, they exclaimed, can this mean? But the more jaded and cynical among the crowd assumed they must just be drunk.

Peter's mind raced. He remembered Jesus' mysterious promise of the coming of the Spirit of truth. Could this be that coming? What had Jesus said?

"He will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and will declare to you the things that are to come.

"He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you – all the things of the Father that are mine, he will declare to you."

Peter hadn't had the slightest inkling of what that was all about at the time. But could this strange thing be what Jesus was trying to tell them about? If it was, then this was the pouring out of the Spirit of the Lord which the prophet Joel had prophesied for the future time of the ultimate fulfillment of all things! It had to be! What else could it be?

So Peter stood up, and after dismissing the notion that they could be drunk so early in the morning, he told those gathered,

“This is what it means. God has poured out his Holy Spirit upon all people, just as the prophets of old foretold. The sons and daughters of Israel dispersed among all nations, *your* sons and daughters, will speak of God's saving acts, and young and old alike shall envision his glory, before the day of his coming in power and might. “And on that day everyone who calls on his name will be saved.”

And what is his name? As Martin Luther famously put it in the hymn, “Ein’ feste Burg,” or “A mighty fortress”:

*“Er heisst Jesu Christ, der Herr Zabaath, und ist kein ander Gott.”*

“His name is Jesus Christ, the Lord of hosts, there is no other God.”

“For this Jesus,” Peter continued, “whom you crucified, God has raised up and made both Lord and Messiah.”

Strong words, those. Brave too, coming from a man who was the leader of a group of men and women in hiding, in fear for their lives. It was not merely Peter speaking them, but Peter speaking by the power of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Life that had raised Jesus from the dead – of the things of God disclosed to him. But Peter underestimated the Holy Spirit, although the way in which he had done so only became evident to him later.

All of the people gathered that day were Jews. They may not have been able to string together a decent Hebrew sentence to save their lives, and they may have been living among other peoples in all corners of the far-flung Empire, but they were still Jews.

Peter did not recognize that when God said, “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh” it really meant that when God poured out his Spirit, it really would be on *all flesh*, not just Jewish flesh. He did not recognize that when God said, “On that day, everyone who calls on his name will be saved”, the word “everyone” really meant *everyone*, not just Jews.

Jews were not supposed to have anything to do with Gentiles, or non-Jews, who were considered to be unclean before God and therefore rejected by God. To us it sounds like some sort of fetish, but the distinctness of Israel’s identity as a people dedicated to the Lord may have been important for God to use them to reach all the other peoples of the world, to reach us. Be that as it may, the Jews tended, naturally enough, to take their distinctness before God and the world as an end in itself.

So what the Holy Spirit was in fact pressing upon those first Christian Jews was something that went so much against the grain for them, so much against everything they had been taught and had ever believed, that it took them awhile to recognize it. For Peter, it took a vision of non-kosher food and the divine command to eat it, coupled with the appearance of a Roman centurion who had faith, a story which is told in [Acts 10](#).

Ezekiel’s vision, of the dry bones being given flesh and breath by the Spirit of God who shall live within them, sheds some light on this, though. The dry bones to be given life, Ezekiel is told, are

the house of Israel, spiritually dry and cut off from God, and exiled from the land of Israel. That they should be given new life would seem to support the notion of Jewish exclusiveness.

But the emphasis is not on their *Jewishness* but on their *deadness*, the *dryness* of those bones. No Jew could touch the dead, but priests especially could not come before the Lord if they had been in contact with the dead, and even with cleansing rituals a long period of time had to elapse before he could resume his duties before the Lord. And Ezekiel was a priest.

So the valley of the dry bones was a place of death, of corruption, of evil – and the Lord took Ezekiel the priest and set him down in the midst of these bones. Ezekiel would have been shocked; he would have been sickened; he would have been gagging; he would have been reeling and about to pass out.

But the Lord commanded him to prophesy to the bones, to prophesy to them of life, of wholeness, of fulfillment as the people of the holy God living by the power of the Spirit of the Lord within them. “Can these bones live?” said the Lord. Ezekiel was smart enough to say, “Only you know, O Lord”.

He must have been thinking, thought, something like, “How can the Spirit of the Lord have anything to do with the dead?” -- but in his vision he did as he was told notwithstanding and prophesied to the dead, dry bones. And he witnessed their restoration and their new life by the Spirit that ostensibly couldn't stand having anything to do with them.

I think the key to the problem with the understanding of these prophecies, the one of Ezekiel and the one of Joel, was that they were both prophecies of the Last Day. And clearly the Last Day, the Day of Judgment, the day of final consummation, when all of time and history is finally wrapped up, has not yet come, since we are all still here within time and space and history.

To say that the Spirit of the Lord will give life to the dead on the last day, or that the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved on the Last Day, when all things are to be reconciled to God or else perish, is one thing.

To apply all of that to *this* day, when reconciliation seems at best to sputter along in fits and starts, is something else again.

So why did it happen that very soon after Pentecost the Holy Spirit was also poured out upon the Gentiles, and the fledgling Church of Jewish believers in Jesus just had to accept and embrace it? Or, to put it another way, *why*, according to the prophecies of the Old Testament to which the early Christians referred, would the Holy Spirit do such a thing?

The reason is that what is prophesied for the Last Day, the reconciliation of all things to God, has already happened. It has already happened in germ form, if you will, so that the die for the Last Day is already cast. It has happened in the event of Jesus' death and resurrection, in the sense that in him the reconciliation of God and the world in rebellion against God has been accomplished. He is the archetype of God and humankind reconciled to each other.

The tension between sinful humanity sin and the righteousness of God is overcome in this human being Jesus Christ as he gives himself in love for the world. What else are we to expect on the last day than this reality, given in him, *filling* all things? This archetypical realization in Jesus Christ of the resolution of all things on the Last Day now presses decisively on the present day, pressing history toward the full actualization of the reality given in the risen Christ.

In him, the dead are given new life – even though death still happens. In him, peace reigns in the cosmos – even though wars still rage.

That is why the Holy Spirit is now poured out on the Gentiles – on us, that we may take our part in the reconciling presence and work of Jesus today. This is why the early Church had to recognize and confess that ethnicity doesn't matter, that gender doesn't matter, that social status or class doesn't matter, that being maimed (like the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8) doesn't mean defective in God's eyes and therefore that doesn't matter either.

The only thing that matters is faith in Jesus Christ, to accept, to say "yes" to what God has done in him. That is the one decisive thing. Nothing else matters on the Last Day, and so nothing else ultimately matters among us today.

This is the mega-narrative, if you will, behind our life together as Christ's church after Pentecost, behind this Christian community that meets here at James and Jackson, in this industrial city of Hamilton.

So we should not underestimate the value of our life and work here in the name of Jesus. This applies to our mission and outreach, our church school, our kitchen work, our presence in the community, the work of the Session, and yes, our committee work.

Seriously.

It has this meaning, and the power of the Spirit of God is behind it, so long as it's really directed toward Christ's coming on the Last Day to actualize the full reconciliation of all things to God in his gracious, self-giving love.

Is it? Let's do the self-examination we need to do, let's pray and study together to discern the leading of the Spirit in the way of Jesus Christ today. Let's make sure that what we are doing really *is* the ongoing work of actualizing today the reality of reconciliation given for all eternity in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And if the Spirit leads us to recognize the need to make some changes, then let's make them. Change has an honourable history in the church – not change for the sake of change, but change for the sake of Christ. The Bible says so – so there you have it!

Amen.