

## **Year A**

### **Acts 2:1-21 & Genesis 11:1-9**

Power can be used in at least two ways: it can be unleashed, or it can be harnessed. The energy in ten gallons of petrol, for instance, can be released explosively by dropping a lighted match into the barrel. Or it can be channeled through the engine of a car in a controlled burn and used to transport a person 350 miles. Explosions are spectacular, but controlled burns have lasting effect, staying power. The Holy Spirit works both ways. At Pentecost, he exploded

on the scene; His presence was like "tongues of fire" (Acts 2:3). Thousands were affected by one burst of God's power. This remains the one outstanding example in Scripture of God's Spirit seizing hold of the moment and turning everything upside down. Most accounts of the Spirit's work were not like this. Instead we find a quiet, steady compulsion or witness that undermines complacency and brings about change. You see, the Holy Spirit works through the church—which Jesus began, to tap the Holy Spirit's power for the long haul. Through worship, fellowship, and service, Christians

are provided with staying power. And how we need it! Two thousand years have passed since the events described in Jerusalem that day. No-one in the early Church would have conceived such a scenario unfolding. Christ would be back within the span of the generation who were left. There would be no reason to doubt that. Why would he be waiting any longer after all? So there was quite naturally a boldness in witness and a firm resolve to get the message out there so that people would be prepared to meet the returning Messiah. There was no point in being shy about this when time was short. If

only they could have seen the convoluted journey that the Church would embark on through two thousand years. Would they have set off at such a pace with that knowledge? We will never know. But we do know now that the work which was begun that day in Jerusalem is still needed. The task has not been completed despite the efforts of so many millions of people through the generations.

The incredible story of the tower of Babel lurks in the background to the Spirit's explosive work at Pentecost. This ancient tale sought to offer an explanation for the

dispersion of the nations of the world and for the many languages that are found among humanity. From the desire to pull together to be a powerful force came the blowing apart of their intentions and a fragmentation that they would never recover from, or so it seemed. Ethnic groups would form nations who would compete for supremacy and none would rest until they achieved the upper hand. Through the course of history no nation was able to win through decisively, and so the curse of Babel remained. And when we arrive at Jerusalem with the thousands gathered to celebrate the ancient

Jewish feast of Pentecost we find the crowds in confusion. No doubt the people were struggling to understand one another. The Jews, after all, had travelled from across the known world to be there. They would have shared a knowledge of the common languages of the time but each one would have been aware of the cultural differences among the people. And so when the disciples emerged outside addressing the crowds in their own languages it caused quite a stir. What could this mean? None of them could have predicted that this was the beginning of the reversal of the curse of

Babel. No-one could possibly have been as fore-sighted as that but that was precisely what was happening. Here was a new order emerging in the midst of the confusion. It is no accident that this new order appeared in speech. It was the communication in the many languages that made the impact.

Remember the significance of speech in the creation of the world. How often do we find written in Genesis 1, “and God said”? We read it continually through the chapter. It was the speech of God that brought order out of confusion. Babel represented the exact opposite of that order as speech

became confused and people pulled apart into their own little groups.

At Pentecost 'the them and us' mentality was taken on. The old divisions were confronted by the radical word of God, spoken by a group of uneducated Jews. It began with the Jews. All those who were gathered in Jerusalem that day were Jews from all over the known world. God was beginning his work of reconciliation with his own people. The same principle remains for us today, this new Pentecost Sunday. God begins each day with his own people.



Being much concerned about the rise of denominations in the church, John Wesley told of a dream he had. In the dream, he was ushered to the gates of Hell. There he asked, "Are there any Presbyterians here?" "Yes!", came the answer. Then he asked, "Are there any Baptists? Any Episcopalians? Any Methodists?" The answer was Yes! each time. Much distressed, Wesley was then ushered to the gates of Heaven. There he asked the same question, and the answer was No! "No?" To this, Wesley asked, "Who then is inside?" The answer came back, "There are only Christians here."

That remains the initial challenge of Pentecost. If there are divisions among God's people to the extent that we might as well be speaking different languages from one another then we are in trouble. Our lives are simply reflective of the old order of things; the time of Babel. Our voice cannot be united and so we sound like a clamouring crowd; no-one can make out anything we are saying, it is just a din. That is what happens when the Spirit is not being heeded. We have observed already that the actions of the Holy Spirit on that Pentecost day were explosive. But that is not the normative way

that the Spirit works. Ordinarily it is the still, strong voice; the steady compulsion to get up and to get out and to make a difference. On that first Pentecost the tongues of the apostles were already loosed before they left the room. They were on their way out into the crowd before they knew where they were. It is unlikely to be like that for us. We're unlikely to be given a supernatural ability to speak a strange tongue but just as impressively our tongues may be loosed to speak and to act in ways which we could never have done before. Wherever there is division of any kind we are

called to get up and to go out; to bring the presence of God's Spirit, that alienation and confusion would be dispelled and the reconciling power of God would be at work. All of this is exciting and surprising. No-one could have seen beyond life as it always was after Babel. The possibility of a new way was lost even to the most imaginative dreamer. Not everyone would embrace the new way of Pentecost. Many would be in danger of being left behind and that remains the danger today.

If people would have been asked in 1968 which nation would dominate the world in

watch making during the 1990s and into the twenty-first century the answer would have been uniform: Switzerland. Why? Because Switzerland had dominated the world of watch making for the previous sixty years.

The Swiss made the best watches in the world and were committed to constant refinement of their expertise. It was the Swiss who came forward with the minute hand and the second hand. They led the world in discovering better ways to manufacture the gears, hearings, and mainsprings of watches. They even led the

way in waterproofing techniques and self-winding models. By 1968, the Swiss made 65 percent of all watches sold in the world and laid claim to as much as 90 percent of the profits.

By 1980, however, they had laid off thousands of watch-makers and controlled less than 10 percent of the world market. Their profit domination dropped to less than 20 percent. Between 1979 and 1981, fifty thousand of the sixty-two thousand Swiss watchmakers lost their jobs. Why? The Swiss had refused to consider a new development—

the—the Quartz movement—ironically, invented by a Swiss. Because it had no main-spring or knob, it was rejected. It was too much of a paradigm shift for them to embrace. Seiko, on the other hand, accepted it and, along with a few other companies, became the leader in the watch industry.

The lesson of the Swiss watchmakers is profound. A past that was so secure, so profitable, so dominant was destroyed by an unwillingness to consider the future. It was more than not being able to make predictions—it was an inability to re-think

how they did business. Past success had blinded them to the importance of seeing the implications of the changing world and to admit that past accomplishment was no guarantee of future success.<sup>1</sup>

Everything has changed. The new era has begun and we rejoice in the abundant blessings of our God.

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<sup>1</sup> White, James Enery 1998 *Rethinking The Church*, Baker Books, p. 20.