

Acts 2:1-21
Psalm 104:25-35, 37
Romans 8:14-17
John 14:8-17, (25-27)

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO, RECTOR OF ALL HALLOWS PARISH, SOUTH RIVER, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND, ON THE FEAST OF PENTECOST, MAY 19, 2013, AT ALL HALLOWS CHAPEL AND THE BRICK CHURCH.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the famous story of the Tower of Babel, humankind, united by a common language, devise to build a tower that would extend all the way up to heaven. In accomplishing this tremendous feat, not only would they reach an unprecedented level of engineering and architectural success, but they would also be able to dwell where God and the heavenly hosts abide.

But to teach the arrogant humanity about their limitations, God confuses their speech. All of a sudden, the common language they speak develops into myriads of languages, dialects and unintelligible sounds. From then on, misunderstanding ensues; suspicion arises; and this grandiose building project fails.

And then, almost two millennia ago, fifty days after Christ's resurrection and ten days after his ascension into heaven, people who normally speak the same language start to speak all kinds of different languages. But unlike the confusing event at the Tower of Babel from time immemorial, these individuals actually can understand each other. And now, these simple Galileans, empowered by the Spirit, have become multilingual. Because of that, they attract the attention of the pilgrims from various countries who come to see what's happening.

'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? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.'"

My brothers and sisters, these were the Christians who witnessed the birth of the Church on that first Pentecost. In sharp contrast to the failed project of the Tower of Babel, God is now ushering in a new era - the age of the Church - in which peoples of all languages and cultural backgrounds will be united as one in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

They were very excited. They were asking, "What does this mean?" Some clearly saw this as a uniquely spiritual moment, while others sneered and maintained that these folks were drunk.

Then, Peter exercising his apostolic leadership, summoned the crowd and preached to them about the significance of this Pentecost event - the birth of the Church. He was the head of the apostles, to whom Jesus had once said, "Peter, on this rock, I will build my church."

My friends, what we have here is some very important spiritual insight. What we have heard here can help us grow, step by step, into the full stature of Christ. What we have here can help change anyone from being a "pew potato or nominal Christian" into being a proprietor of the Church and steward of God's creation. Basically, the zeal of that first Pentecost can keep our spirits forever hopeful, forever faithful, and forever young!

Let me explain why step by step.

When we look at the assembly on that first Pentecost, we will immediately notice three things. First, they were multilingual. Second, they were amazed. Third, they listened to the preacher! :-)

Now, let's look at each one in more details. Being something of a linguist myself, I enjoy the scenario here. These "Galileans" became multilingual not because they studied Rosetta Stone, but because the Spirit made them so. Any time God has given us the ability to do something, that usually means there's a greater purpose. And what is the greater purpose here? To show us that, just as God has the power to confuse the languages of the people at the Tower of Babel, so, too, does God also have the power to unite the peoples of many nations on Pentecost through languages.

What does that really mean for us today? What if we don't have the desire or the facility for languages? What does the multilingualism of Pentecost mean for us then?

Brothers and sisters, the deeper meaning of the multilingual situation, the glossalalia, of Pentecost is communication. Sometimes, even though we speak the same language, it may appear that there is no communication. We tend to see that a lot in the political arena nowadays, where everyone is speaking in English, and yet there is not much real communication happening. Communication in the church for us today means trying to understand where everyone is coming from. Our family history, belief systems, interpretations of Anglicanism, may all seem to lead to different types of individual speech and diction. Can we try to share that with each other? Will each of us try to understand each other's faith better?

Even though I'm not Korean, I've learned a Korean expression from the recent state visit of the President Park Geun Hye to Washington, in which she said, "In Korea, we have an expression, "It takes two hands to clap."

Perhaps, that's a good way to understand the multilingualism of Pentecost. If we want our church be to in sync, to be jubilant, to be vibrant, it takes all of us to communicate our faith.

The second point we can glean from the Pentecost assembly is their amazement. I suppose we would all be amazed, as well, were we all to start speaking different languages right now. But the key is that in order to keep our faith fresh and alive, we must be prepared to be surprised by God. Remember how excited you were before the first day of college? Remember how excited you were before your wedding day? Remember how excited you were at the settlement of your first home?

That's the amazement in life that God has given us. And we need those moments cyclically to rejuvenate us, to fill us with the Holy Ghost.

It seems to be written into our natures to rejoice and celebrate new beginnings. It's as though the excitement and surprises of these new beginnings keep us charged up for a period of time. And then, things may go back to normal, to the day in and day out routine, ... followed by boredom, problems and decline.

But nobody really wants those things: boredom, problems, and decline. That's why, whenever we see these ominous signs, it's important for us to look back at Pentecost. That's why we need the zeal of new converts, new Christians, the newly baptized, so that those of us who have been around for a while can be re-energized and re-vitalized.

To sum up the second point: we should find ways to keep ourselves excited about our faith.

Third and last but not least, there is listening to what the preacher says. I did mention that the multilingual crowd on the first Pentecost did listen to Peter preach.

But what does this mean for us today? The point here is for us to pay attention to the proclamations of the church. And we should pay attention to what with all of our God given faculties and skills of critical thinking. And we should pray over the proclaimed word of the church. Sometimes, we may agree with it. Sometimes, we may not. Through the ages, that's what the pious and faithful have done, reflecting and exploring and pondering over the meaning of the Word, Sacraments and miracles. This is the very process through which we have received what we cherish so much as the second leg of the three-legged stool of Anglicanism: Tradition. I won't digress too much here on the different facets of Tradition. I'll save that for another sermon. But, remember, how the church preaches the Word of God and how we receive this preaching forms the backbone of the Tradition of the Church. In the Episcopal Church, that includes the preaching on Sundays, the decision making of the Vestry, and the resolutions of the conventions of our church. Pentecost reminds us to be engaged and attentive to all these modes of preaching.

So to sum up, on this Day of Pentecost, let's remember to communicate with each other; let's remember to keep ourselves refreshed and excited about our faith; let's remember to hear what the Church preaches about our faith.

When we do all that, we will indeed keep the Spirit aglow upon our heads!

May the Spirit guide us into all truth.

Amen.