

The Power of the Spirit



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Acts 2:1-17

¹When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. *Estaban todos unánimes juntos. Ils se trouvaient tous ensemble dans un même lieu.*

²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each one of them. ⁴And all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?

¡Cómo, pues, les oímos nosotros hablar cada uno en nuestra lengua en la que hemos nacido?

Comment se fait—il alors que chacun de nous les entend dans sa langue maternelle?

⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabians,—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.

¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

And in the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young shall see visions, and your old shall dream dreams.

**Je répandrai de mon Esprit sur toute chair; Vos fils et vos filles prophétiseront,
Vos jeunes gens auront des visions
Et vos vieillards auront des rêves.**

*Derramaré de mi Espíritu sobre toda carne,
Y vuestros hijos y vuestras hijas profetizarán; Vuestros jóvenes verán visiones,
Y vuestros ancianos sonarán sueños.*

¹⁷Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my spirit; and they shall prophesy.

It is Pentecost again. The text that I have just read we probably know almost by heart. As each word is read, we already know what the next word will be. There is nothing new here. And so, in the midst of all the excitement about Commencement and the upcoming vacations, we greet this text, we greet this season of Pentecost, with an attitude of déjà-vu. We have been here before. We know what it's all about. Let's move on to something new.

We are so used to hearing the story that we no longer realize what it must have been like for those who lived through it. We know that it is a miracle. We know that it has a happy ending.

Yet look at the text again as if you had never heard it and try to imagine the situation. Here are all these people together in one place, praying, suddenly, a sound came from heaven like a mighty wind. Were that to happen right here, now, we might think that the weather service had failed to warn us of a sudden tornado. We might even quit praying and run for shelter!

"And there appeared to them tongues as of fire." There are no volcanoes in Miami. But even so, if now, suddenly, fire began raining from heaven, we would not only be surprised. Let's confess it; we would be mighty scared!

So, the very first thing to be said about Pentecost is a simple, but all-important point: The action of the spirit is not always immediately comforting. It is easy to speak of the Spirit as Comforter. But the Spirit is also cleansing fire, mighty wind, earth-shaking action of God. And it is only by the spirit that we are able to see the action of God in the fires and winds of our day.

Today we see all kinds of movements around us. Sometimes it may seem that the very foundations of the church, as we have known it, are shaking, that the mighty winds of change threaten to sweep it away. We hear noises, and we fear. We see new peoples, new movements, new opinions, and we wonder. And yet, . . . could it not be that even through changes that we find threatening God is at work opening up a new future, as on that first day of Pentecost?

Let us set that first point aside for a moment and look at a second point that should be obvious from our text, but which we often forget: The miracle of Pentecost does not consist in everybody hearing the message in the same language. It is not that those who were unable to understand the Aramaic, which the disciples spoke, were somehow given the power to understand that language. It is rather that somehow the message was heard in the native language of the Parthians, the Medes, the Elamites. This is not melting—pot inclusiveness. Parthians are not told that they have to learn the language and the ways of the Galileans in order to hear the message. The message comes to them as Parthians, in Parthian.

In first-century Palestine, there were strong nationalistic feelings, especially as the country was overrun politically by the Romans, and culturally by the Greeks. There were those who insisted on the need to

preserve the cultural purity of the people of God, and who looked on all strangers as a threat to the well-being of the nation. Yet the spirit does not endorse an "Aramaic-only" policy.

Enough on this second point. As we say in Spanish, *"al buen entendedor, pocas palabras bastan"* ("for those who will understand, a few words suffice") or, as the Good Book says, "Those who have ears, let them hear."

The third and most important point requires that we look again at the text. Who are the scoffers who say: "They are filled with new wine?" A great and astonishing miracle is taking place. People from all sorts of linguistic backgrounds hear what is being said in their own tongues. And yet there are some who laugh. Why? Presumably because they did not perceive the miracle. How could anyone have been present at such an event and not perceived the miracle?

The answer is simple once you stop to think about it. The scoffers are people who do not perceive the miracle because they expect to understand anyhow. A Parthian who did not expect to hear the language of Parthia would be astonished, especially upon realizing that a Cappadocian and an Elamite could also understand what was being said. But a native of Jerusalem, someone who was used to understanding what was said, would have greater difficulty in perceiving the miracle.

And so they laugh. They laugh at the disciples who speak, and they laugh at those around them, who act as if something extraordinary were taking place. "Why are all these people so excited? Haven't they

ever heard someone addressing a crowd in our native language, the language that most folk around here speak? What's the big deal?" And so, they conclude: "They are filled with new wine."

What we have here is another instance of the theme that is quite common in Scripture: that those who seem to have the inside track are precisely the ones who are in greater danger of being left out, of not perceiving the miracle. They cannot perceive the miracle because they expect to understand; and precisely because they expect to understand, they do not really understand.

But there is an even deeper reason why people are unable to perceive a miracle such as this. It would upset their lives. And here we come back to the first point: Pentecost is a frightening thing.

Look at the crowd of scoffers. Let your eyes roam over them. There you see old Joshua. He is an old man. He has worked all his life. Now he is happily retired. He has left his wife Judith back at home, preparing a nice meal for them and for their children and grandchildren, who are coming home for supper to celebrate Pentecost. It's a beautiful morning, and he has gone out on a stroll. He is contented. Life is good.

And then, just as he turns a corner, he comes upon this crowd. Rising up and speaking in the middle of them is an old man, just like Joshua. But his eyes are alight with new life, as if he were dreaming dreams that are only for the young. "Drunken fool!" says Joshua. But what he really means is "if I don't watch out, I'll get caught up in this thing. And goodbye, happy retirement!"

Then he sees those young women. One of them looks like his granddaughter Rebecca. What would happen if Rebecca began acting like that? God forbid! And that woman! She is about Judith's age. She should be home cooking for her family and not making a spectacle of herself.

So, old Joshua decides that they are all drunk, and he hurries on to his home and to his wife, and to his family, and to his meal, and to his contented retirement. And he misses the miracle.

But what about us? Do we see a miracle? Are we even able to see the miracle? Or are we so contented with our lives, so afraid of a life that could be different, that we shut it out, and in our own way say, "they are filled with new wine"?

"And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." Some time ago, I was lecturing in Cali, Colombia. One afternoon a family took me out to see the city--the parents, a son of eighteen, and an older daughter who was a seminary student. We saw the beautiful avenues and the fancy hotels that tourists always see. But we also saw the vast sea of cardboard and tin hovels, stretching out as far as the eye could see. People who have been pushed out of their lands by drug barons and by international agribusiness. It had rained that week, and the whole area was flooded. Human excrement floated along the streets in which children were playing. In the midst of that misery, the eighteen-year-old was speaking with enthusiasm. He was telling me of a weekly radio program he and a group of friends were running. "People in Colombia do not know this exists," he told me. "So, I come to areas like this every week, and I interview people, and on Saturday afternoon I put it on the air." And then, in a more sobering tone, "Some people don't like it." Some time later, when the father and I were alone, he

looked at me with tear-filled eyes and said, "They'll probably kill him for what he is doing." I knew, I was sure, that his next words would be, "It's terrible how these young people get such ideas in their heads." But no. He wiped his eyes, smiled, and said: "But we are Christians. That's how we raised him. I must share his dream."

"Your son and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young people shall see visions." Sounds very good. But are we really ready to see it in our midst? When the young people in our churches, when our own children, reject the notions of success by which our society lives, and come to us with a different vision of life, will we see the work of the Spirit in it? Or will we say, "that's youth, just wait till you grow up and have to face reality. You are filled with new wine?"

"And your old people shall dream dreams. There is not one of us here who is so old that the Spirit cannot instill in us a new dream! A dream of people understanding each other, as on that first Pentecost. A dream of people eating together, as in the final banquet that the Lord has promised. A dream of the Spirit alive in us, no matter how old and how weak the flesh may be.

Poor old Joshua. That day in Jerusalem, he was offered the opportunity to dream again, to live again, to be alive in the Spirit. But no. He went back home, told his wife about the strange sermon he had heard from some dreaming fool, and simply . . . kept . . . on . . . growing . . . old.

And so it is with us today. Look around you. What do you see? Do you, like old Joshua, see nothing but people filled with new wine, crazy dreamers who have nothing better to do? Or do you see the vision

that the Spirit is placing before us, a vision of an institution like no other, serving the church in unique and creative ways in this multicultural city, which is Miami? A vision of a church which in this strife-torn city somehow points to the Holy city of God, where all nations shall dwell together? A vision of a city and a time when we shall love and serve each other, and proclaim the wonderful deeds of God, each in our own native tongue?

We are gathered here today to celebrate not just a graduation. We are gathered here to celebrate the Holy spirit of God, who from the creation moved over the face of the waters; the Spirit poured out at that first Pentecost; the same Spirit that still works miracles among us The Spirit who can take a man in a wheelchair and make him soar with the eagles. The Spirit who without millions of dollars in endowment and without national denominational backing, can give birth to one of the most exciting places for theological education in the entire country. The Spirit who empowers dreamers to devote their lives to the ordained ministry, and to spend years of study in an institution such as this, when there are so many more profitable and more sensible occupations. The Spirit who, in the midst of a city divided by strife of race, language, class and culture can still bring together this unlikely crowd which we are.

So, this Pentecost, let us celebrate the Holy Spirit of God. Let our sons and our daughters prophesize! Let the young see visions! Let the old dream dreams! Let us all announce the mighty deeds of God, each in our own tongue, *cada uno en nuestra propia lengua*, **chacun de nous dans sa langue maternelle**.
Amen.