

Opening the Kingdom of God to everyone

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Pentecost Year B – Ezek 37 Ps 104 Acts 2 John 15-16

Spirit and New Creation *When you take away our breath, we die. When you send forth your Spirit, we are created, and you renew the face of the Earth.* Ps 104.32 APBA

Today, as at every Whitsunday, we're presented with a vision of the first Pentecost – new Spirit-life being poured out into our existing life; new life poured out to renew us and make this life even more abundant, more inclusive, more diverse.

Acts 2, tells us how crowds of Jews from all over the world had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot – the Jewish feast we Christians call Pentecost. In the Jewish faith, Shavuot is the Spring festival, celebrating God's gifts of the Law and the wheat harvest. It's a celebration of God's on-going provision to those who live in the secure haven of God's Law. (Deut 7:12-13) It celebrates the ever-new gift of abundant life. So the crowds gathered in Jerusalem were already there to celebrate God's abundant providence, but suddenly, even more life was poured out on them.

The immediate miracles of this story are the disciples' sudden burst of courage and the diversity of languages. Newly leaderless fishers and farmers from the backwater of Galilee suddenly burst into the crowd proclaiming God's deeds of power. And they do so in all the tongues of the known world, all at the same time. The crowds of faithful Jewish people had gathered from all the home-countries of those languages. That day, they were all invited to take new hold of their birthright; to embody the commissioning of Abraham and join

God's mission to bless all families of the Earth.

Before the Holy Land and its people ever existed, God had promised Abraham that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed – that Abraham and Sarah's descendants would become the people through whom God would bless all families of the Earth with abundant, ever-new life.

Isaiah spelled out this destiny of Israel in an oracle from God: ^{42: 6} *I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations ...* and today, here it was all happening in their sight and hearing.

The crowds listening to this multi-language sermon – the mighty deeds of God proclaimed in all their languages at the same time – all these people were being commissioned. They should each carry this gift home with them to every country they'd come from. The Jews' time for being set apart was over. From this moment on, the Good News of God was officially launched to all families of the Earth.

The blessing is handed over, and it's marked with fire, just as it was many centuries earlier with the burning bush ^{Ex 3} and the pillar of fire. ^{Ex 13} Our Paschal candle has proclaimed this for the through the Easter season. And with this blessing of holy fire came a gift of prophecy, another sign of the Spirit's presence. ^{Num 11.24ff} Fire marked out each disciple as Spirit-filled, and the prophetic words they spoke in the tongues of every nation staked out God's claim on the whole Earth.

That Pentecost, that Shavuot, that day, it sounds as if God cranked the amplifier and converted a solemn religious ceremony into a birthday party. The followers of Jesus became something like living, speaking birthday candles – like the burning bush, ablaze, but not consumed – speaking the very

words of God to a crowd who'd never dreamt they'd hear such words spoken directly to them.

Birthday party? My dear old mentor, Brother Gilbert, used to scoff at preachers who called Pentecost the birthday of the Church. 'Rubbish!' he'd roar. 'The birthday of our faith is the call of Abraham'.

He was right, of course. He always was. But I might just defy him for a moment longer. If I dared to call Pentecost a birthday, I'd have to say that Pentecost is like our twenty-first birthday – our coming of age. We were given a key that day – a key to open the Kingdom of God, but to others – to everyone.

And it's vital that we do. All families of the Earth do know life, but do we all know it in the abundance God wants for us? What's the Psalmist telling us? 'God sends forth the Spirit...and the face of the Earth is renewed"^{104.32} We join today with the whole Earth calling on the Spirit to come and renew the face of the Earth! Amen.