

31 May 2009

Pentecost: A Brilliant Third Act

Acts 2:1-13

There are reruns of the TV show 'Everybody Loves Raymond' that still play here in the UK. That show was funny for a lot of reasons—not least because every so often I could catch glimpses of the Italian-American side of my own family. So many of the episodes center around food—Marie, the mother-in-law, cooks amazing food and gets her identity from it, while Debra, the daughter-in-law, can't cook as well and always feels inferior to Marie.

In one of my favorite episodes Debra begs Marie to teach her how to make meatballs. They spend the day together talking and mixing and cooking, but at the end of the day, when Debra asks Raymond to sample the food, he gags and says there's something wrong with it. As it turns out, Marie had changed one of the labels on a jar of spice, so that Debra would never get the recipe right. She did it to protect her identity—her role in the family as the maker of food—but in the end she had to apologize.

Now I know most of you think that I spend way too much time talking about food, but something wonderful can happen when all the right components are put together in a meal. Something truly memorable can happen when that final ingredient is added to the mix—the one that makes everything just right—just as it was meant to be.

We're going to see something like that in our text today.

1When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

5Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. 7Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? 8Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? 9Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11(both Jews and converts to Judaism Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" 12Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

13Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

What a great picture that is. The disciples and other followers are all together when a storm blows through the place. All of a sudden they can speak languages they didn't know, and people around them could understand them. I especially love the way the text ends: 'Amazed and perplexed they asked one another "What does this mean?'" The people around them had an answer: They thought the Christians were drunk—that they'd partied a little too hard that night.

We spent the last few weeks looking at the appearances of Jesus after Holy Week—after the crucifixion and resurrection. It's those appearances, and the way they're written about and understood in the Scriptures, that make up the basis for our faith—for our hope that Christ really is who he said he is, and that he can do what he said he would do.

We've also been trying to get some perspective on just exactly what the Atonement means for us. The Atonement is the theological term for what God has done to bring us back to him. During the run up to Easter we talked about how Christ's atoning work offers healing for all of our relationships: with God, with ourselves, with each other and with the earth. This is crucially important stuff for us to wrestle with as we grow in our faith as disciples of Jesus.

I've been describing the Atonement as a drama that happens in three acts: the Cross, the resurrection, and Pentecost—the gift of the Holy Spirit. On the Cross, a price is paid for the sin and brokenness in all of our lives. The resurrection—the Easter miracle—demonstrates that God has power over all things, even death. And the gift of the Holy Spirit is God's way of inspiring and empowering each of us to be the people he made us to be in the first place.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is something like the final ingredient in God's plan for the church. He's called it, redeemed it, demonstrated his power to give it confidence, and now he's made good on his promise to come and make the community of faith into what it was meant to be—to complete the recipe for his church.

We've been talking about Jesus ministry and especially the Cross as the first act of the Atonement story. In dramatic terms, The first act is used to establish the main characters, their relationships and the normal world they live in. Early in the first act some incident occurs that confronts the main character, whose attempts to deal with this incident leads to a second and more dramatic situation, known as the first turning point, which signals the end of the first act, ensures life will never be the same again for the protagonist and raises a dramatic question that will be answered in the climax of the film. The dramatic question should be framed in terms of the protagonist's call to action: How will the character respond to this new turn of events?

If we see the resurrection as the second act, listen to how that's described in dramatic terms. The second act, also referred to as "rising action" (perfect!), typically depicts the protagonist's attempt to resolve the problem initiated by the first turning point. They must not only learn new skills but arrive at a higher sense of awareness of who they are and what they are capable of, in order to deal with their predicament. This cannot be achieved alone and they are usually aided and abetted by mentors and co-protagonists.

Finally, the third act features the resolution of the story and its subplots. The climax, also known as the second turning point, is the scene or sequence in which the main tensions of the story are brought to their most intense point and the dramatic question answered, leaving the protagonist and other characters with a new sense of who they really are.

Thinking about the Atonement as a three-act drama is helpful here, especially now that we've gotten to the final act. In dramatic terms, the gift of the Holy Spirit gives us resolution of the story and its subplots. It ensures that the main dramatic question is answered. And finally, Pentecost leaves the protagonist and other characters—that's us, by the way—with a new sense of who we really are

When the Holy Spirit enters the picture and becomes the main driver of the church, the church's story finds its resolution and its purpose. It's with the gift of the Spirit that we see the whole story at least a little more clearly, and the plots and subplots start to make sense.

The Spirit also answers that main dramatic question: Why did all of this happen? As we grow and learn and serve together we see how the three parts of the Atonement drama accomplish God's plan of bringing us back to him.

And finally, in keeping with the classic three-act dramatic form, Pentecost leaves us with a new sense of who we are. The gift of the Holy Spirit transforms us into the people we were meant to be all along, both individually and even more profoundly as a community of faith. The gift of the Spirit is more than just the introduction of some strange languages into the mix. It's the ingredient that gets into us and completes us for the task of being Christ's disciples and Christ's church. That's what we celebrate at Pentecost.

This year the BBC is celebrating English poets and poetry—the slogan for the series is 'Let Poetry into Your Life.' As a recovering literature major I was compelled to watch Simon Schama's amazing journey through the poetry of John Donne. I completed my senior seminar at UCLA on the religious poetry of Donne, and have read him ever since.

At the beginning of the hour, Schama was walking the streets of London and asking people if they knew who Donne was, and it was sad to see how many people said they had never heard of him. The reviewer in the *Guardian* the next day complained that people had lost the sense 'that this is the sort of thing we ought to lie about.'

Donne was known for writing some of the truly great carnal poetry in the history of the English language. In his seduction poem 'The Flea' he basically says to his partner: Since that flea has bitten us both, our blood is already mixed. (You can see where this is going.) We might as well finish the job. In the poem 'To His Mistress Going to Bed' he's not above begging. He says: 'Licence my roving hands, and let them go' Try some of Donne's poetry at home—he doesn't disappoint.

But Donne was a passionate Christian, too. When he became the Dean of St Paul's here in London he took those hot-blooded images into the sermons and Christian poetry he wrote during the rest of his life. In one of his Holy Sonnets he says to God:

*Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,*

*Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.*

The BBC has it right this time. We could all stand to let a little poetry into our lives.

I suppose the call to each one of us at Pentecost is to 'let the Holy Spirit into our lives'. Just as poetry is supposed to get into our hearts and minds in a way that other forms of language can never do, the Holy Spirit calls us and transforms us in a way that nothing else ever could.

Think back on all the claims we made about the Holy Spirit in our creed today.

We confessed our belief that the Holy Spirit,
justifies us by grace through faith,
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
and binds us together with all believers
in the one body of Christ, the church.

That the same Spirit
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
engages us through the Word proclaimed,
claims us in the waters of baptism,
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
and calls women and men to all ministries of the church.

We admitted today that we believe the Holy Spirit gives us courage to pray without
ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

Maybe if we were to go out and share that message about the Holy Spirit our neighbors
would think we were drunk, too.

So what?

What do we care if people misunderstand what our faith is about, at least at first—even
when we struggle with it? The point for us at Pentecost is to remember that the Holy Spirit
completes the Atonement process perfectly and decisively. That the Holy Spirit functions
as that last ingredient that makes the rest of the meal taste exactly as it should.

The Holy Spirit comes and makes all of us, both individually and as a community of faith—
the Spirit makes all of us into the people we were meant to be all along. People who share
their faith whether they talk about it or not, with every person they meet—at home, in
the workplace, on the bus, and in this church.

Listen to how John Donne preached this at St Paul's on Pentecost Sunday in 1628. I've updated the language a little but here's what he said:

The Holy Spirit is poured into you, if he has made any entry, if he has taken hold of any corrupt affection in your life. But if the Spirit is poured in, he can also be poured out of you. Just as wine is poured into a glass and fills it from top to bottom, the Spirit fills you and covers every part of you.

When we are filled, the Spirit then overflows to the benefit of those around us. Receive, then, the Holy Spirit, so that it can overflow from your example to the edification of others.

That you may go home and say to your children: receive the Spirit in contentment and thankfulness.

You can say to your employees: receive the Spirit with integrity and a sense of duty.

You can say to your neighbors: receive the Holy Spirit in the name of peace and quiet.

To those you owe money to you can say: receive the Spirit with patience and tenderness and compassion.

To those who owe you money: receive the Spirit for your resourcefulness and hard work.

You see, preaching itself is useless if the Holy Spirit is not in the midst of it. And if the Spirit is in the midst of it, we all become like the apostles, called to be fishers of men, people who take part in God's plan to redeem the world.

We do this by the best preaching there is, Donne said, an exemplary life and holy conversation.

Isn't that wonderful? Donne pretty much gets the last word here. Not much to add to that, except this: We offer this final hymn today as a prayer that the Holy Spirit might pour out of us in every relationship—every place we live and work and go—to the glory of God alone.

Amen.

Let's stand and sing together: 'O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing'