

Acts 2:1-13

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] What does the church most need today? What do you most need to live and witness as a Christian in 21st century Scotland? There is no one answer to that question, but as I first scribbled down the question as I was preparing the sermon, I was reminded of two wee boys who were in my Sunday school class in Govan Hill Free Church about 30 years ago. And I think I may have told you about these two wee boys before, so if you remember, bear with me. These two wee boys, and I won't go into all the details, but they had a very modest grasp of the Bible, even of the most well-known Bible stories, which probably reflects on their Sunday school teacher, but let's leave that and pass on quickly from that. But they had, they were brothers, these two wee boys. They had devised a fail-proof strategy for answering any question that I posed, and it boiled down to this, if in doubt, say God. And they found out that that usually got them through any interrogation from their teacher. Well, let's go back to the questions that I began with.

What does the church most need today? What do you most need to live and witness as a Christian in 21st century Scotland? Well, the wee boys from Govan Hill would hit the nail on the head. We need God. You need God. We need the power of God. We need to be empowered by God. And today is Pentecost Sunday, and the day of Pentecost is all about the power of God. It's all about God empowering His people for witness. It's about God empowering His people with Himself. What did Jesus promise His disciples before His ascension? In Luke chapter 24, we hear how Jesus instructs His disciples, stay in the city, and still you have been clothed with power from on high. And in this book of Acts, in the first chapter of the book of Acts, we also have recorded the promise of Jesus, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in

Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Pentecost is all about power, the power of God clothing the people of God, the Spirit of God indwelling the servants of God.

I want to spend a little time this morning exploring Pentecost. What was the coming of the Holy Spirit like, and what did the Holy Spirit do, and what does the Holy Spirit still do in favor of God's people? But before we do that, we need to take a step back and note the place of Pentecost in the big story of redemption. I think there are two principal, intertwined, overlapping truths concerning Pentecost that we need to note. Firstly, Pentecost is the final once and for all act of the saving work of Jesus prior to His return in glory. Jesus was born, He lived, He died, He rose again, He rose again, He ascended into heaven, He sent His Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and He will, on a day determined but unknown to us, He will return in glory. So, Pentecost is one of those once and for all saving acts of Jesus in our favor. Secondly, and vitally connected,

Pentecost is the inauguration of what we might call the New Age, the New Age or the New Gospel Age, the last days, to use the language of the New Testament, or the Age of Mission as it has sometimes been rightly described. This New Age was prophesied by, among others, the prophet Joel, and Peter makes reference to that in the sermon that we are not going to have time to look at this morning, and it was promised by Jesus. And this new gospel age can be described in different ways, but we can legitimately describe it as the Age of the Spirit. And understood in these ways, Pentecost is unrepeatable. It is, to use the language I've already used a couple of times, it is or it was a once and for all event. The Holy Spirit is given to the church once in this pivotal, in this essential way.

[4 : 57] It is as unrepeatable as the birth of Jesus, or the death of Jesus, or the resurrection of Jesus. We would never contemplate that any of these things could be repeated. We acknowledge that they are once and for all events, and so too with Pentecost. And yet, though Pentecost is, as a redemptive event, unrepeatable, the same Holy Spirit who came down 2,000 years ago continues to come down, and the work that He did in the disciples on that historic day is a work that He continues to do in disciples in us today. And so, there needs to be that balance between acknowledging Pentecost as a once and for all occasion, and yet also acknowledging that the Spirit who was sent on that day very much continues to be active in and with and for God's people. We are as much in need of being clothed with power by the Holy Spirit in order to fulfill our mission as those 120 disciples in the upper room.

in Jerusalem, without the Holy Spirit. We, as a congregation, are a body without breath, or to put it rather more vividly, a corpse. Now, as we explore the first 13 verses of Acts chapter 2, we'll try and answer the following two questions. What was the coming of the Holy Spirit like, and what did and does the Holy Spirit do? So, they're very basic, quite simple questions in many ways, but we want to just draw out some answers from the verses that we've read. And as we answer the questions, we will notice how there are aspects of Pentecost that are, as the event itself, unrepeatable or unique. But we'll also notice that as the ministry of the Holy Spirit is ongoing and current. So, there are aspects of Pentecost that are and must be repeatable and the necessary experience of our Christian community. So, first of all, let's think about that first question. What was the coming of the Holy Spirit like? Well, verses 2 and 3 describe this dramatic moment when suddenly the promised Holy Spirit made His dramatic entrance into the upper room and into the lives of every believer present on that occasion. We read there in verse 2, suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. And I think it's reasonable to assume, even though it's not explicitly stated, that those gathered there on that occasion were the 120 of which that are spoken of elsewhere. So, all of the disciples, not just the apostles, but all of the disciples, men and women, maybe younger folk as well. And certainly what is stated very clearly here is that all of them who were experienced upon all of them rested these tongues like fire.

What was that moment like, the moment described in these two verses? Well, in one sense, it's an indescribable moment and hence the need to use the kind of language that Luke uses. Notice that it's very clear that what he's doing is trying to describe that which he's perhaps struggling to find words to describe. So, he speaks about like the sound of violent wind and what seemed to be tongues of fire.

Language almost fails him, but inspired by the same spirit who came down on that occasion, Luke does his level best to paint a picture for us. And there are two pictures in particular that we need to notice and consider. First of all, a sound like the blowing of a violent wind. And then secondly, what seemed to be tongues of fire. Let's think of both of these just briefly. First of all, a sound like the blowing of a violent wind. It wasn't the wind, not even a violent wind. It was the Holy Spirit with a sound like a violent wind serving to illustrate truths about the Holy Spirit, namely His power and particularly perhaps His life-giving power. And there are, I think, echoes here on the day of Pentecost and in the events described of the valley of the dry bones that we read of in Ezekiel, how these dry bones were given life as the wind and the Spirit came and breathed into the dry bones.

And so, a sound like the blowing of a violent wind speaking of and pointing to the power of God and particularly the life-giving power of God in the person of the Holy Spirit. But then also what seemed to be tongues of fire. And again, it's clear what has been stated, these were not tongues of fire, but they seemed to be. They had the appearance of tongues of fire. But again, it was the Holy Spirit and the fire, these tongues of fire illustrating, pointing to the reality of His holiness and purity, and maybe particularly and very practically His purifying work in the lives of the disciples upon whom these tongues of fire rested. So, these were the signs on that day, on that once and for all day of Pentecost.

[10:56] And these signs were unique. It would seem as unique as Pentecost itself. These are not signs that we should expect to ordinarily experience in the life of the church. They were signs that were fitting and appropriate for this once and for all redemptive event. But the truths that they represent, the Holy Spirit that they speak of and point to, of course, remain vividly contemporary. The Holy Spirit is as powerful and empowering today as He was on the day of Pentecost. He is as pure and as purifying today as He was on that unforgettable day when the tongues of fire rested on the disciples. And how we need that power, how I need that power, how Bon Accord needs that power, how the church in Scotland needs that power. And so we ask that we be granted that power. Come, Holy Spirit, and clothe us in Pentecostal power. How we need that purifying work of the Holy Spirit, how we need that fire that cleanses, that fire that brings light in the darkness and warmth, in the chill winter of unbelief and corruption and decay that seems to pervade all around us and sometimes even in us. What was the coming of the

Holy Spirit like? Well, the coming of the Holy Spirit was like a sound of the blowing of a violent wind, what seemed to be tongues of fire resting on the disciples. But moving on to the second question, what did and does the Holy Spirit do? And we have an answer to that question in verse 4. Some of the answers to that question in verse 4. We read there, all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. So, Luke moves on from describing the events to indicating what the impact of the Spirit's coming was on the disciples. First of all, we're told that the Holy Spirit fills. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. When we say that the Holy Spirit fills, the obvious question to ask is, well, what does He fill with? And the answer is with Himself.

They were filled with the Holy Spirit, not by the Holy Spirit, but with the Holy Spirit. And the experience being described had been previously spoken of by Jesus as He anticipated this day.

And the words that Jesus used in anticipation of the day are recorded for us by Luke and different languages used. Jesus spoke of, as we noted at the beginning, of the disciples being clothed with power from on high, of being baptized with the Holy Spirit. And now we read of them being filled with the Holy Spirit. These are simply different ways of describing the same event at Pentecost. I think we can get into difficulties if we try and be too clever and try and give to each of these expressions some different or distinct meaning. They're different ways of describing the same event. Now, what does the language of being filled, suggest, or describe? Well, the picture is of the Holy Spirit taking up permanent residence in the life of the believer, of the Holy Spirit taking possession and control of the lives of the disciples, being filled with the Holy Spirit. Well, what about us? Well, in the light of the teaching of the New Testament, we believe that all Christians are baptized with the Holy Spirit on conversion. But we also recognize that Paul uses the language of being filled with the Holy Spirit in an additional manner, particularly in his letter to the Ephesians in chapter 5 and verse 18, where he encourages the believers to go on being filled with the Spirit, where the idea there is of the need for us to be permanently being filled, the fullness of the Spirit as a permanent and recurring need of the believer. And so we are filled with the Spirit, all believers baptized with the Spirit of God, and yet the challenge and the need, the urgency of being ever filled by him and with him. So he fills. But what else does he do? Well, he also enables. That's the other verb we find there in verse 4. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. So the Spirit enables. But what does he enable us to do? Well, there in the verse it's very clear, to speak in other tongues or in other languages. A couple of questions arise around this statement. First of all, what was that? What was it that they were doing? But then also, what is the significance of what the believers were enabled to do? On this occasion on the day of Pentecost, it is very clear that the other tongues were other languages. Throughout these verses, verses 6 and verse 8 and verse 11, we're told repeatedly that the audience, as it were, the crowds who were there, heard the disciples speak in his own or in their own language. So without any doubt, what they were doing was speaking other languages, the languages of all the nations that are listed here in this passage. What we have then is the disciples being granted by the Holy Spirit a supernatural ability to speak languages that they did not know that they had not learned. And that is what happened on the day of Pentecost. Is that something that we should ordinarily expect to be granted to us as disciples of Jesus? I would suggest not. I would suggest that's not something that we should expect. It would be great, it would be nice to be granted such an ability, but that is not something we can expect to be the ordinary experience of believers today. Now, we don't rule out God's prerogative to grant such a gift as He sees fit. But the significance of this being granted the ability to speak in other languages is enduringly relevant and contemporary. The significance of what happened at this once and for all event is relevant today. Well, what is the significance? We've already touched on it as we spoke with the children. And the symbolism of this ability to speak in other languages to all the nationalities that were gathered for the Feast of Pentecost there in Jerusalem. The significance is clear and eloquent.

[18 : 09] The gift vividly and dramatically symbolizes the universality of the kingdom of Jesus, not only for the Jews, not only for some closed group of specially privileged ones, but rather the kingdom of Jesus, open to all, to Jews and Gentiles, to Romans and Egyptians, to Africans and Asians, to Europeans, all the known world in that day represented there in Jerusalem. And all were to hear the great wonders of God. All were to be given the opportunity to repent and believe in Jesus as their Savior. And that open invitation so vividly illustrated by these Galileans, generally considered to be very uneducated, perhaps a lot of prejudice associated with that image that they had or the way in which they were viewed even by fellow Jews. And yet these Galileans, the last people you'd expect to be multilingual, and yet here they are, speaking all these languages of the known world. And the message is clear. Jesus is for everybody. Jesus is for all the nations. Of course, Luke goes on in the passage to identify the nations and languages that were represented at Pentecost. Without going into the details, I think we can view this list, though not an exhaustive list of every nation under heaven, to use Luke's language, but nonetheless, a list that is representative of all what was then the known world, from Asia to the Middle East to Europe to Africa, or as Luke with that, legitimate though exuberant license declares every nation under heaven. Now, as we think about this gift of speaking in other languages and the significance of it, maybe we can just for a moment step back and view the whole history of redemption from the fall to the gathering of the redeemed before the heavenly throne, and note within that sweep of redemptive history, note the pivotal place of Pentecost vis-a-vis the purposes of God for the nations. And we can maybe just bring out three moments in that history to illustrate this. You remember almost at the very beginning, you remember at Babel, how at Babel, man rebelled against God, building this great tower that was to reach heaven, a symbol of man's autonomy and independence and power, and that provoked God's just judgment. And that judgment of God found expression in the confusion of tongues and the consequent division of and hostility between the nations in a measure produced by and certainly perpetuated by language and communication barriers.

There was a confusion of tongues. And so, in the beginning, the multiplicity of tongues was actually an evidence of God's judgment on mankind. Though it's a wonderful thing, isn't it, how God, even in acting in judgment, can bring out that which is good and enriching. I think today we rightly acknowledge the multiplicity of languages and cultures as an enriching reality of humanity.

And so, God, even in an act that was of judgment, is able to produce something that is in itself something to be valued and appreciated. But nonetheless, it was an act of judgment, this confusion of tongues. And then what do we have at Pentecost? What are we witnessing here as we read this chapter? Well, really, it's not, I think, too much to say that we have at Pentecost a deliberate and dramatic reversal of the curse of Babel. As God's people are granted the ability to speak in all these languages, that this language barrier would no longer apply in the same way. But then also at Pentecost, we find a foretaste of heaven as gloriously described in John's vision. We've been making our way through Revelation over the last, I guess, few months now. We haven't reached chapter 7 and verses 9 and 10, but let's just read what it says there as John has granted an insight into the worship of heaven. In Revelation 7 verse 9, we read,

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands, and they cried out in a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. Pentecost points forward to that gathering of God's redeemed people. It reverses the curse of Babel and points forward to that heavenly choir. And so you see the place that it occupies in the big story.

So the Spirit enables the disciples to speak in other tongues or languages, but He also gives them the content of their discourse. Then in verse 11, we're told what it is that they spoke about in these other languages, and this is the evidence that we have from their hearers. We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues, in our own languages. What wonders? What wonders of God did they declare? Well, I think Peter gives us the heart of the matter at the very beginning of his sermon.

[24 : 15] You know, he begins by addressing his audience. He then makes reference to how what they were witnessing and was a fulfillment of what was spoken by the prophet Joel. But then in verse 22, he homes in on what is the heart of the matter. He says, fellow Israelites, listen to this. I've set the scene, now listen to this.

And how does he begin? Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus of Nazareth. That is the message. That is the message that the disciples were enabled to proclaim, the wonders of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

And his saving work. So, what did the Spirit do? What did he do then? What does he do now? He fills his people. He enables his people. Then also he emboldens his people. Now, we don't have that word in the passage, but we do have the evidence of this work of the Spirit in the lives of the believers. Verse 6 tells us that the crowd heard this sound. There in verse 6 we read, when they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment. And the sound that they heard, presumably, was the sound of the believers exercising this gift that they had been given. Now, the question is, how did the crowds who were gathered there in Jerusalem? How did they hear this if the disciples were still where they had been at the beginning? In verse 1, when the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Now, again, we're not identified what that place is or was. It's generally thought that it was the upper room that is spoken of elsewhere. And if that's the case, then they were in a place where had they exercised this gift, people wouldn't have heard them. People outside wouldn't have heard them. The crowds wouldn't have heard them. So, it's very obvious what has happened. They've left the room. They've left the house. They've left that enclosed place. And they've gone to find the crowds and to speak of Jesus, to declare the wonders of Jesus of Nazareth. That's why the crowds hear them. That's why they can be amazed by what is happening. So, that is what the disciples did on being filled with the Spirit. They leave the room and look for the crowds, emboldened by the Spirit. Well, what about us? Will we leave church this morning and look for the crowds? Will we go out and gather in men and women from every nation, trying people and language gathered as they are on our very doorstep here in Aberdeen?

Well, as we kind of draw some of these threads together to close, we can also just note the reaction that there was to these believers filled with the Spirit. And throughout these verses from 1 through to 13, there are several occasions when the reaction of the crowds is described in different terms.

So, in verse 6, we speak or we read of how the crowds were bewildered. In verse 7, they're described as being utterly amazed. In verse 12, they're described as amazed and perplexed. And then in verse 13, you have a slightly different reaction. Some made fun of them. I don't know who they would have been. Would they have been ones who didn't understand what was being said for some reason?

[27 : 53] Or what would the reason would have been for that very different reaction? Now, these responses are perhaps principally to the remarkable sign of speaking in other tongues that accompanied the baptism with the Spirit. And so, it would be surprising to find those same reactions in every audience that's exposed to Spirit-filled believers, people like ourselves. That said, these reactions or the variety of reactions that are found there do seem to be the kind of responses that we can expect in the measure that we are living our lives and sharing the good news of the wonders of God in the power of the Spirit. I'm not saying it will always be the same, that on every occasion you will have all these, all this variety of reactions or responses. But it seems reasonable that if we are living as we ought and proclaiming as we ought, then these are the kind of responses we should expect to find.

I suppose the question for us, a very sobering question perhaps, is do we provoke such a response? I can maybe ask a more probing question. Do we provoke any response? Is there anything in the lives that we live and in the message that we declare that provokes any kind of response?

Well, if we return to where we began, the question where we began, what does our church most need today? And no doubt many possible answers could be given to that question, and many of them perhaps useful and valid and legitimate. But our greatest need is for the Holy Spirit of God, that He would fill us and transform us into the image of Jesus, that like a rushing wind, He would move amongst us, enabling and emboldening us to declare the wonders of God in our own valley of dry bones, and that He would work in the lives of those who hear our message, producing the miracle of the new birth. And for all of this, we stand utterly dependent on the Holy Spirit of God.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Spirit. We thank You for the third person of the Trinity. We thank You for His personality. We thank You for the work that He does, the role that He plays in our salvation. And we pray that He would ever be working in us, that we would gladly and joyfully cooperate with the Holy Spirit in all that He is doing in our lives, transforming us into the image of Your Son. We pray that we would know what it is to be continually filled by Him, that we would know what it is to be enabled to serve You and to exercise the gifts that You have given us, to show in our lives the fruit of the Spirit, to walk in step with the Spirit. And as we do, we pray that that same Spirit would be preparing those whom we speak to and witness to and share with the wonders of God, that they might experience what many of us, by the grace of God, have experienced, is that new birth produced by Your Spirit. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.