

Everything renewed

Acts 2.1-21

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Congratulations. Today we celebrate the birthday of the world-wide church, and therefore also the birthday of our local church, here. And today is your birthday, as a Christian.



It is the birthday of the church, of us, because on this day of Pentecost, God came down to rest in his temple; the temple of the followers of Jesus Christ.

Jesus had prepared this temple, by living for us and dying for us, by returning to his Father in heaven and presenting to Him his perfect sacrifice.

And then God came to be with us for ever.

What happened on that first pentecost in Acts 2, was a completely fresh beginning of God with us, among us, in us.

And stories of new beginnings are good. We need those.

New revelation

The disciples of Jesus - 120 or so - were all together in one house. Maybe they were meeting in the same Upper Room where we found them shortly after Jesus had ascended into heaven.

Ten days earlier Jesus had left them. They knew they had to wait for power, and they knew the promise that Jesus would come back. So they rejoiced.

But I think it is fair to say that they were also confused. Because what what was actually going to happen?

And now the Jewish Feast of Weeks was there. Seven weeks after Easter, actually it was the 50th day. Hence, in Greek, Pentecost. Fifty.

The city was full of Jewish pilgrims, and the atmosphere was rowdy.

The Feast of Weeks originated as a harvest festival; it was the time of harvesting the grain.

Later the feast was also given the additional dimension of commemorating the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai.



I am not sure which of those two things was more important for the Jews in those days. The harvest feast tended to being wild... The work was done, the harvest was in, and the people would party and drink.

Drink a lot. No wonder some on the day of pentecost thought the disciples were drunk.

But other Jews focussed more on the spiritual side of reality: God had given his laws to the nation on that day.

Our Lord gives us all the material blessings that we need, and He takes care of us spiritually. And on the first Pentecost in the book of Acts this was made very clear in a dramatic way.

God came down from heaven to reveal Himself to the followers of Jesus. There was a loud sound as if there was a storm in the house, and it seemed that flames of fire were burning on the hairdo of he disciples.

Wind and fire were in the Old Testament symbols of God's intense presence. When He gave the laws to Moses, the people at the foot of the mountain heard it and saw it from afar. Storms, fire.

But now, God does not reveal himself to one person only like Moses, who mediated the knowledge of God to the nation. Now God revealed himself to all his people. Now the followers of Jesus were all in the midst of the stormy and fiery presence of God.

And now, God did not give a new set of rules to the people, but He gave himself. And He gave himself to all.

God's presence in the life of the church, and therefore also in your life, is personal and intimate. He has come as the Holy Spirit to make you understand his Gospel, as Jesus had promised his disciples at the Last Supper.

God's presence also inflamed their hearts with love; and He dispelled their fears and moved them to preach boldly. This was quite something, with the very unfriendly Jewish population that had just 50 days earlier, shouted for the crucifixion of Jesus.

That is what it means that they were filled with the Holy Sprit. It meant God's powerful presence in the life of the church, to teach us, to embolden us, to make us better people.

So Pentecost is really a feast of renewal. Our own renewal. And who does not need this! Renewal by the presence of God Himself.

New work in people

It was something new. So new that the bystanders who heard the noise of a storm, they gathered to see what was going on.

When they approached the 120 disciples because of the strange stormy sound, they then heard them speak in strange languages. And they were bewildered, amazed, astonished.

Luke, who describes the event, does not give us details of the strange phenomenon. To me it seems there was a double miracle here: 120 disciples praising God in languages they had never learned.

It must have been quite a cacophony. So it was also a miracle that those people who had gathered could actually understand what was being said.



The city was full of devout Jews from all over the empire, and even from outside the Roman Empire. Parthians, Medes, Elamites and people from Mesopotamia were from outside the Empire.

And we read of proselytes as well. These were people who were not born as Jews, but who were attracted to the Jewish faith and lifestyle.

Many were only temporarily in Jerusalem as it was a time of pilgrimage, but there were also many who had taken up residence in Jerusalem. And then of course there was the normal population, people from Judah and Jerusalem.

So it was a very mixed crowd. There were the expats in Jerusalem. And there were many from Jerusalem itself. They were like people from our Amsterdam, or from the Randstad.

They saw these Galileans, these locals, these farmers, jubilate and praise God.

What is this! The kinder and more thoughtful people wondered.

They are drunk! Was the immediate conclusion of the not so open minded.

When we come across strange events, new things, abnormal occurrences, it is sometimes wise to wonder and keep an open mind than to immediately brand the others as drunk. Or crazy.

With an open mind you may actually learn something new.

Isaiah had prophesied to the people of Israel that “by people of strange lips and with a foreign tongue the LORD will speak to this people.” (Isa 28.11) Paul in his letter to the Corinthians quotes this verse in the context of what he writes of this strange phenomenon of people speaking in tongues, or in strange languages.

So I think it was certainly a sign for Israel that new times had come. A time of judgment actually. That was the context of Isaiah.

But also, the disciples spoke in these strange languages just 10 days after Jesus had told them that they had to go into the whole wide world to evangelise.

The fact that in a miraculous way they now spoke languages that they did not know, must be seen, I think, in the light of their new world mission.

There is a strange link here with the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. In Babel, the people did not want to move into the world, they wanted to stick together.

But God used languages to divide the people, so that the project of Babel did not work.

Now God uses languages to spread the Gospel. Pentecost is not a reversal of Babel, because God is not doing away with languages and cultures. But He gives his people their languages to be a blessing for others in their uniqueness.

For thousands of years God had addressed Israel in its own language, Hebrew, and for many Jews this language of their Holy Scriptures was seen as holy. If you wanted to pray to God, you better do this in God's own language, was the idea.

But now, the Spirit of God makes his own people speak the languages of all nations. This is new. We do not have to learn the language of God, but He speaks our language. He speaks your language.

For God, every language, every culture, is welcome in his Kingdom. This is why the first feast of Pentecost was the beginning of the one worldwide church, and the beginning of the mission of that church in the world. A new era had begun.

That is, by the way, also a motivation for us as a church to try to find ways to celebrate the culture of each of us. This is not easy, but it is a recognition of God's view of each and every language and culture as valuable. Please help us with your suggestions how we can do this better.

New era

Peter tries to explain it to the people. He quotes from the Prophet of Joel from the Old Testament. 'This is what Joel spoke about.'

The bystanders had come because of the strange phenomena - wind, fire, a strange worship service - but Peter points to the heart of the matter.

God had promised to pour out his spirit on all flesh, and this is what has now happened.

On all flesh, that means, on all types of flesh. On all sorts of people. Peter unpacks this. He mentions:

Sons and daughters: meaning, the Spirit is available for men and women alike.

Young men and old men: So the Spirit does not discriminate with regard to age.

Male servants and female servants: So the Spirit is present both to the owner of the company and to the gardener, or the unemployed.

This was new for Israel, where the work of the Spirit was not unknown, but it was very sporadic.

But now all people of God will participate in the work of the Spirit. They will experience visions, and dreams, and prophecies.

God makes his Spirit available for each of you. All servants of God, all people in the church of God can enjoy his presence, his attention, his gifts, his blessings.

Peter continues quoting from Joel, and point to the prediction of wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below.

Why does Peter mention this? I think he actually reminds the people in Jerusalem that only 50 days before, around their feast of Easter, the sun stopped shining on mid-day, when Jesus was crucified, and there was an earthquake in Jerusalem.

In Israel, those events were seen as full of meaning, and Peter explains that a new era had now begun. The last days had begun, the day of the Lord had come.

The Lord had given his Holy Spirit to his people, in abundance.

Conclusion

And our proper response to this? Call upon the name of the Lord and be saved.

Later in his speech, Peter said “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Turn to Jesus Christ and you will also enjoy this awesome amazing personal presence of God in your life.

And our response should also be that like those apostles we present Jesus Christ to others. Do not be shy. Do not hesitate. Be bold like Peter.

Your neighbours need God. Your family members need Jesus Christ. Your colleagues need the Holy Spirit to brighten their lives.

We live, since the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, in the last days. God works in our world, in our church, in our life.

Let us be open to what God wants to do in our midst. Where the Spirit of God is, miracles can happen.

God is present, here, now, and each day in your life. Wherever you are. Irrespective of how you feel.

But to enjoy that presence of God, we need to pray. And to enjoy His presence, we need to proclaim his Gospel, nearby and far away.

Amen.

