

# Pentecost — A New Beginning

*Readings: Genesis chapter 11, verses 1-11; Acts chapter 2 verses 1-13*

Today is Pentecost Sunday; the day on which we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit (at least according to Luke. St John has a different timescale in his gospel.) And, if you asked me to put the significance of this day into three words they would be *a new beginning*. In fact there are three beginnings.

Creation was the first. The opening words of the Bible in Genesis 1 are “in the beginning God created” and immediately following them we read that “the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters”. The first reference to the Spirit of God and it is in the context of creation. Here was the power and energy of God bringing form and order and life; the creative Spirit.

The second beginning was in Jesus. Not for nothing do Matthew and Luke speak of Jesus as being “conceived of the Holy Spirit”. They are saying that; from the very beginning Jesus was the Spirit-filled man and in him we see the beginning of a new humanity.

The third beginning was on the Day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit not only transformed and revitalised the disciples as individuals but created a new community.

Three beginnings; and the Spirit of God intimately connected and involved and responsible for all three. That’s the context in which I want to explore the significance of Pentecost today.

## **1. The Holy Spirit creates a new humanity.**

We saw that possibility actualised in Jesus and what was focussed in Him is now universalised so that Christlikeness is offered to all. The Spirit which energised Jesus is available to “everyman”. Outwardly we see the transformation in the behaviour of the disciples. On the Day of Pentecost they were huddled behind locked doors and barricaded windows “for fear of the Jews”. Not only were they afraid. They were dispirited and disillusioned. Men without hope. Then came the Holy Spirit; a coming which Luke describes in flamboyant imagery and technicolour language — a driving wind and flaming darts of fire. But there can be no doubt about the consequences. A new courage; a new hope; a new confidence. These previously frightened men are out on the streets, fearlessly proclaiming a crucified and resurrected Christ to be the Way, the Truth and the Life.

That was the outward transformation. But the Holy Spirit brought about an inward transformation as well. It was a transformation of character. These men had a new focus, a new motivation and that changed them. Their lives are characterised by a selflessness and a concern for others and this leads us into the second dimension of the Holy Spirit’s activity.

## **2. The Holy Spirit created a new community.**

We read that those who had experienced the Spirit banded and bonded together in the earliest known experiment in communism. In the words of Acts “they had all things in common; they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had any need”. That was an extraordinary experiment in communal living. And it is this sense of community which our world so desperately needs today.

The breakdown of communities lies at the heart of so much that is wrong with our society. We no longer live in communities but in associations; there are those we associate with at work; those we associate with in our leisure time; but these associations have no binding effect upon us. Meanwhile the neighbourhood in which we live is anonymous. A survey last week showed that few people know their next door neighbours and even fewer would call on them for help. We live our lives in isolation and that inevitably means our lives are self-concerned. It’s all the more important therefore for the community which we call the Church to fill the void. We need to provide a place where people can feel they belong and are accepted. Our fellowship should be such where peo-

ple's needs are met out of the shared resources of our fellowship; be those needs material or emotional or spiritual. A real sense of community would transform the lives of many and if the Church does not offer it who will?

There is another dimension to this which we never think about. The Holy Spirit not only creates a new local community but a new international community as well. I am absolutely convinced that when Luke wrote up his story of the Day of Pentecost he had at the back of his mind the story in Genesis about the Tower of Babel. If you remember that story it begins with the assertion that humankind was a unity. The sign and symbol of that unity was that they all spoke and understood one language. Then came a description of how humans tried to build a tower with its top in the heavens and displace God. This act of rebellion was in effect a coup-d'etat against God. And such a sinful act had huge consequences. Humankind was fragmented; its unity destroyed and the Genesis story symbolises this disruption by saying that from then on people spoke different languages.

Now turn to the Pentecost story. When the Holy Spirit came one effect was to enable them to communicate in such a way that "everyone heard them speaking in his own language". If you pursue the symbolism of that in terms of the Tower of Babel story Luke is affirming that in fact the Holy Spirit has recreated the unity of humankind. Disrupted, fragmented and polarised by sinfulness the unity of the human family has been restored.

Nor is this an idealistic vision which lies in a distant future. It happened straight away. A few years later Paul was able to point to people in the churches he founded and say "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek; male nor female; slave nor free; but all are one". In other words the barriers which have bedevilled the world are broken down. The racial barrier is down - there is neither Jew nor Greek. The gender barrier is down - there is neither male nor female. The social barrier is down - there is neither slave nor free. In Christ all are one.

I saw this transformation as a fact of life in Zimbabwe. And if Christians could be instrumental in creating a new national community there then can we not envision Christians being instrumental in facilitating a new international community? I say facilitating because it is the Holy Spirit who creates community, not us.

That then is the significance of Pentecost. The coming of the Holy Spirit creating a new humanity and a new community. What we need is another Pentecost today and we don't have to wait for it. Through the Spirit God is present and active in our world today and the Holy Spirit is offered to us as gift. If only we will open our lives to receive this greatest of all gifts.