

Prayer for Enlightenment

O Lord, we pray, that you speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips, and in the thoughts we form.

Speak, Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

The liturgist got the short straw this morning for the Scripture reading. It is notorious for being one of the trickiest readings in the year, with all those strange names to deal with; Parthians, Medes and Elamites, the residents of Cappadocia, Pontus, Phrygia, Pamphylia and all the rest. Perhaps the only scripture text that rivals it is the first verses of Matthew with all the begats.

The writer of Acts wasn't intending this to be a challenge by naming all these geographical places. I think what the writer was saying people from all over the civilized world – as they understood it – were present.

Listen again to these first verses as we watch them appear on the map...

⁷ Amazed and astonished, they [the crowd] asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power (Acts 2:7-11).”

People from every point of the compass were present in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. This was from every point of the world as far as these people understood the world.

But there is something more here...

These were places where there were significant ex-pat Jewish communities.

Some of these communities had formed along trade routes.

Other communities had started when Jewish people were exiled or forced to seek refuge in times of trouble.

As is so often the case, many of these ex-pat communities became similar to those about them...their new culture and home. There had essentially now become Roman or Libyan or Parthian, speaking the local language, wearing local clothes, sharing in the culture of that place.

But, one factor still singled them out...their faith.

They still followed the teachings of Judaism, and read the Jewish Scriptures, even if their understanding was colored by those around them.

But the old country has a way of drawing migrants home from time to time.

...and in this case it wasn't just about nostalgia.

Jewish law required people to make sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem at special times of the year.

That wasn't very practical if you lived in Rome or Parthia, but if you could, you'd try to make the odd trip now and then. There were also proselytes, converts, from those nations too, but coming to this faith as an outsider.

The Old Testament prophet Micah had spoken of a time when all nations would come streaming to Jerusalem to worship on the holy mountain. "Many nations shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, that he may teach us his ways" (Micah 4.1), and this seemed to be what was happening as these diverse people climbed the Temple mount.

But what did these visitors find when they arrived in Jerusalem?

Even if they'd grown up as devout Jews, or studied hard to learn the customs, it was all a bit alien.

They spoke a different language.

The food, clothes and customs were different.

It should have felt like home, but it didn't always.

These visitors might think they shared a faith with the Jews of Jerusalem and meant the same things by the words they used, but they'd inevitably be bringing assumptions and ideas with them from the places they'd grown up in, and the differences would probably be far more obvious than the similarities.

I was thinking about names of places the other day. How we can tell who belongs to a community – and who doesn't! – by how they say the names of places.

Wayzata, Minnesota

Many years ago, I lived in Portland Oregon. There was a river that ran through the middle of Portland...Let me show you the name

Willamette River in Oregon

Johnson Crick, Wisconsin

That's the experience of these visitors to Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Here they are, gathered in Jerusalem, the mother city of their faith, and yet they are outsiders.

They're not proper Jews, not like the Jews of Jerusalem.

Even the name of the feast, emphasizes the differences they might feel.

It's called the Day of Pentecost in Acts, but that's the Greek name for this holy day, the name these visitors – these outsiders – would have used. Pentecost means fiftieth. This makes sense as this feast is celebrated 50-days after Passover.

But the locals call it something else. Its Hebrew name is Shavuot, which is what you would call this feast if you were an insider and you lived in Jerusalem. Shavuot means "weeks".

They both say the same thing - this is a feast that takes place 50-days following Passover, but which name you call it marks you out as an insider or an outsider.

By the way, Jews just finished celebrating this 2-day holiday yesterday. The holiday began at sundown on May 21st through nightfall on May 23rd...yesterday evening. Today this feast commemorates the giving of the Torah by God to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai...this occurs 7-weeks after Passover.

In Bible days this feast celebrated the wheat harvest and included bringing the first fruits to the Temple – something like our Thanksgiving feast in November.

In Jesus' day you brought to the Temple an offering of the seven sorts of produce which ripened around this time in the land of Israel; wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates (Deut. 8:8) .

So it was all about your ties to the land, this land, where these things grew.

But these same fruits did not grow throughout the far-flung reaches of the world.
They could not grow in the mountains of Cappadocia or the burning deserts of Arabia.

This Pentecost story is a story about foreignness, strangeness, and being an outsider.

That is why what happens next in the story is so significant. The apostles - those first followers of Jesus - were Jews, born in these Jewish heartlands, just as Jesus had been. They spoke Aramaic and Hebrew, as their ancestors had done.

They were right at home here...in this Promised Land...their Promised Land.
Their ancestors had lived here for centuries...they were insiders.

Jesus had preached a message that God's love was for all, but it was only now, after his Ascension, that his followers were starting to realize what that might mean for them.

But the whole world was a big place...and the people in it were a mighty strange lot.
Even the ex-pat Jews who they saw around them on the streets of Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost were pretty odd, never mind the rest of the world.

As they sat in that room in Jerusalem they knew it was too much for them.
But the good news of this story is that when God calls us, he doesn't expect us to face the challenges of that call on our own.

These frightened followers in Jerusalem could never really describe exactly what happened next. It felt like a rushing wind.
It felt like flames of fire.
But there was no wind or fire.

As is so often the case with these sorts of times, they simply defy description.
The long and short of it was that suddenly they knew that God,
the God of heaven,
the God of might and majesty and power,
the God of creation,
the God who had raised Christ from the dead,
That God swept into their lives and made his home in them.

God had always been with them, but this was the moment when they realized it.
God was at home in them, dwelling with them.

God wasn't stuck in the Temple or sitting on a cloud in the distant sky.

God was where they were, in that ordinary room in Jerusalem,
in the ordinary lives of ordinary men and women, fishermen and tax-collectors, mothers and widows, people who'd met Jesus and whose lives had been changed.

God was at home...in them.
And if God could be at home in them, they realized that God could be at home in anyone.
That was the message they proclaimed as they ran out to the crowd in the streets.

I don't think they didn't even realized they were proclaiming it.
But the words coming out of their mouths were in Cappadocian and Libyan, and Parthian, and those who heard them understood them.

Something strange happened at Pentecost.
Tongues of fire...
Languages from all the earth...
Being considered drunk in the early morning...
But let us not get caught up in attempt to describe the indescribable and miss the message.

Sometimes I think that the church misses the point.

In this story from Acts, the people around the disciples do not suddenly learn to speak the disciples' language. It's the other way around. The Holy Spirit gives them the ability to speak the languages of the people gathered around them. They were in the middle of an international crowd, with many different languages, and they could suddenly communicate with everyone.

I'm all for learning other languages, but this story isn't about taking Mandarin lessons or immersing ourselves in Finnish. Instead, I think this is about learning to speak in ways that are relevant to the people around us.

For all its mystery, what happened at Pentecost conveyed a simple message to those who were there.

You do not need to go to the Temple to find God.
You do not need to be in the city of Jerusalem to find God.
You do not need to speak Hebrew to speak with God.
Whoever you are...wherever you come from, God is with you.
That may be in the Jerusalem Temple speaking Hebrew...but it could just as easily be in the mountain meadow of Cappadocia speaking Greek.

God is at home everywhere.

It all starts, as it did on the Day of Pentecost, with us.
Spirit of the Living God...Fall afresh on me..."

My Pentecost prayer is that we would discover the Spirit of God at home in us, so that we can go on to discover that everyone in the whole world can be God's home as well.
Then let us trust that same Holy Spirit to fall upon us helping us to speak in new ways spreading this great-good news.

Thanks be to God.