

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Pentecost – Year C

RCL Readings – Acts 2:1–21; Psalm 104:24–34, 35b; Romans 8:14–17; John 14:8–17

ACNA Readings – Genesis 11:1–9; Psalm 104:24–35; Acts 2:1–21; John 14:8–17

Introduction. This Sunday brings us to the festival of Pentecost (*Shavuot*) and its huge significance for God's people, ancient and modern. This was a harvest festival, and certainly includes the themes of God's material and spiritual blessings and the propagation of his blessings across the whole world.

Common Theme. The NT and Gospel readings point us to Pentecost and to the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. We see in the psalm also that God's Spirit is at work in all life and Paul affirms the Spirit's experiential work in the heart of the saints, prompting us to pray to God as "Abba, Father."

Acts 2:1–21. Pentecost. Luke makes clear that this pouring out of the Spirit took place when the day of Pentecost arrived. This day is one of the three pilgrimage festivals that attracted many Jews to Jerusalem (Passover/ *Pesach*, Pentecost/*Shavuot* and Tabernacles/*Sukkot*).¹ Pentecost means "fiftieth" and was used by Greek-speaking Jews, but the Hebrew term is *Shavuot*, meaning "Weeks." It refers to the "week" of sabbaths (7 x 7 days) that had to be counted after the bringing of the day of "Firstfruits," literally, the *Beginning Sheaf* (*ōmer rēshiyt*, עֹמֶר רֵאֲשִׁיטָה) of the wheat harvest, also called the Sheaf of Waving (*ōmer ha-tenūphāt*, עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה). This was celebrated on the day after the sabbath following the Passover lamb being slain and eaten. This day of *Firstfruits* was applied by Paul to *Messiah our Pesach* (1 Cor 5:7), as he was raised from the dead on the day after the Sabbath. Paul says to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:20) that Messiah became the Firstfruits of all his followers who "fall asleep" (die), as they too will be raised from death in the final "harvest" of the saints.

In Leviticus 23, the appointed time of *Shavuot* (Pentecost), is presented in parallel to the day of Firstfruits (notice the parallel terms "the day after the sabbath" [23:11] and "the day after the seventh sabbath" [23:16]; also "the elevation sheaf" [23:15] and "the elevation bread" [literally, 23:17]).²

The fifty days from Firstfruits were counted off, and so Luke says here "when the day of Pentecost was fully come," that is, when the counting was completed, fully up. This day of Pentecost involved bringing from the firstfruits of the wheat harvest flour baked into two loaves. We need to reflect on the significant connection made here of the firstfruits of barley (Messiah's resurrection) and the firstfruits of wheat (the coming of the Holy Spirit and the initiation of the church). Leviticus 23 implies that the Resurrection of Messiah and the coming of the Holy Spirit are to be connected in our calendrical theology—the resurrection had to happen before the Spirit could be given! Also, both were to take place on "the day after the Sabbath" which indicates the beginning of a new week ("the first day of the week"). The Resurrection of Messiah and the coming of the Holy Spirit, baptising his people into his Body, are the beginning of a new era and the fulfilment of the purposes of God.

¹ The Feast of Weeks/Shavuot is mentioned in Exod 23:16; 34:22; Lev 23:15–21; Num 28:26; Deut 16:9–12.

² For the details, see Hocking, Paul J. (2020). Repetition Indicating Form and Function: A Rhetorical-Critical Case Study in Leviticus 23. *Hiphil Novum*, 6(1), 2–19. <https://hiphil.org/index.php/hiphil/article/view/32>

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Pentecost – Year C

In later Jewish tradition, after the second century AD, Shavuot was used to remember “the day when the Torah was given” (*b. Pesah.* 68b). The Bible does not say this specifically, but the period that Israel arrived at Sinai overlapped with the wheat harvest period in the annual calendar. On Passover, Israel remember that they were freed from enslavement to Pharaoh, and on *Shavuot*, they remember they were given the Torah and became a nation committed to obeying and serving God.

At Sinai (and other theophanies), the divine presence was symbolised by fire (e.g., Exod 3:2; 19:18). At this Pentecost-after-the-Passion, God's presence was again manifested with fire. John the Baptist had predicted this baptism “in the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16), and the specific image of “tongues like fire” is found in the context of God's burning anger in Isaiah 5:24–25; 30:27–30, and God's presence in 1 Enoch 14:8–25; 71:5.

Calling the disciples Galileans was not just stating a fact of their birthplace but may have been a slight on them as uneducated “country bumpkins,” as implied in later rabbinic writings (*m. Erub.* 2:4; *y. Shabb.* 15d; *b. Erub.* 53a–b).

The list of nations foreshadows the spread of Christianity throughout the world. The order is roughly from East to West, representing the four main areas of the Jewish diaspora: Eastern/Babylonian, Syrian, Egyptian, and Roman. It may be a fulfilment of Isaiah 11, which starts by referring to the messianic Root and Branch, with the Spirit of the LORD resting on him (vv. 1–3) and ends with the gathering of the exiles of Israel (vv. 10–16), being fulfilled here in part.

The word used for “other tongues” in 2:4 is the same word as that used for “tongues of fire” in 2:3, but the word used in 2:6 refers to the local dialect (*dialektos*) spoken by each people-group. The word for “sound” (*ēchos*) refers to the rushing violent wind, but the different word for sound (*phōnē*) in verse 6, may refer to the sound of the languages being spoken by the crowd of apostles and disciples.

Many commentators have argued that this Pentecost after Messiah's Passion is another expression of his new kingdom coming in, reversing the effects of Babel. The story of Babel (Gen 11:1–9, and preceded by the listing of the nations in Gen 10, like here), acts as an origin story for the Babylon theme in the scriptures. At Babel, the people tried to make a name for themselves by building a tower whose top reached into the heavens. The tower of Babel was probably a ziggurat, as these were built with a temple on the top. The Akkadian word is *Bab-ili* and probably means “Gate of God,” but in Hebrew the word Babel (*bā-vel*, בָּבֶל) is a sound-play with the verb for “confuse” (*bā-lal*, לָלַךְ. NET, Gen 11:9, note 23). The LORD came down to see their pitiful effort, and rather than Babel acting as a Gate of God, as a route to communication with the divine, it becomes an expression of God's judgment, resulting in the confusion or mixing up of languages, so all communication and fellowship, whether human or divine, becoming confused. Interestingly, reflecting the tower, the final judgment of Babylon in the book of Revelation comes because “her sins are piled up to heaven” (Rev 18:5).

Here at Pentecost, in Acts 2:12, the word used for the crowd being *confused* (συνγχεω, *sun-cheō*) by each one hearing them speaking in their own dialect, is the same word-root as that used in the story

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Pentecost – Year C

of Babel in the Greek (LXX) of Genesis 11:7 and 11 (twice). The crowd of Babel was puzzled by the multiplicity of languages, while the Pentecost crowd was puzzled by hearing the gospel from Galileans in their own languages!

In opening his sermon (2:14–21), Peter explains the events that have been witnessed by the crowd as actually in keeping with the prophecy in Joel 2:28–32 (LXX 3:1–5). The citation of the prophecy serves initially to explain the phenomenon of “the outpouring of the Spirit” and the speaking in tongues, but the passage moves on to apply the proclamation of salvation for “whoever calls on the name of the Lord.” Peter has also been transformed by the Spirit and shows spiritual insight into scriptural prophecy and moral courage in declaring it!

In Numbers 11:25, we are told the LORD came down in a cloud and took some of the power of the spirit that was on Moses and put it on the 70 elders causing them to prophesy. When Joshua objected to this, Moses responded: “I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” (Num 11:29). Here, Joel prophesies this will indeed take place, and all genders, ages and classes will be included!

The later rabbis understood Joel as referring here to the world to come. (Num. Rab. 15:25; Deut. Rab. 6:14; Tanh. Miqqetz 10), Peter adds “in the last days” to the quotation from Joel, interpreting *his* days as the *last* days, and presenting God’s programme as being realised in this outpouring of the Spirit (JANT, 202).

The prophecy also foreshadows what Luke will go on to tell us in Acts: the offer of salvation to all people, including Gentiles, and the consequent pouring out of the Spirit on all people, the performance of signs and wonders, the prophetic activity of women (Acts 21:9), and the experience of visions and dreams. “The prophetic Scripture is lived out in the experience of the believing community” (Beale, quoting Evans, 533).

Much ink has been spilt on the “apocalyptic” words from Joel—blood and fire, vapour and smoke, the sun turned to darkness and the moon to blood! The evocative words are also reflective of the context of Sinai. One can argue that Peter retains the whole quotation from Joel but that this part was still future to Peter and Acts and indeed to ourselves, but his focus was on the parts about the outpouring of the Spirit, and the calling on the name of the LORD for salvation. However, others make the case that these allusions in the Gospels and Acts from Isaiah 13 and 34, Daniel 7 and Joel 2 are to be read “in terms of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus on the one hand and the fall of the Temple (the heaven-and-earth place) on the other ...[referring] to (what we call) socio-political events and to invest them with (what we might call) their ‘cosmic’ significance.”³ The Messiah’s Passover, Firstfruits and Pentecost have changed history and certainly our access to God in his heavenly temple through Jesus our Great High Priest, with the demise of the earthly temple.

As we have said, the climax of the quotation that Peter wants to build on are the words: “whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” In Joel, of course, “the LORD” is YHWH, and the

³ Wright, N.T., *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (SPCK 2019), 150–151.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Pentecost – Year C

salvation being referred to was from judgment in the Day of the LORD, but here Peter is making it present and calls the crowd to salvation in Messiah Jesus (Acts 2:36–40). Notice, God calls people to salvation in 2:39 (from Joel 3:5b LXX), but also people must call on him to be saved in 2:21. (The same quotation is used by Paul in Rom 10:13, and the verb is found in Acts 9:14; 22:16; 1Cor 1:2; 2 Tim 2:22; 1 Pet 1:17).

Psalm 104:24–35. When you send your Spirit, they are created. This psalm is personal and based on the perspective of a human observer—a call to “my soul” to praise the LORD, the Creator and Sustainer of a perfect world, teeming with his created beings. “Bless the LORD, my soul. LORD my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendour and majesty” (v.1, also vv. 33–34). The creation itself is a theophany and reveals the *cāvōd* (glory) of God (v. 31), and there is no place in this harmonious creation for sinners (v. 35). It resembles the divine catalogue given in Job 38–39 but is more exotic and less idyllic. It is recited in synagogues on the New Moon (JSB).

According to Fokkelman, the whole psalm is made up of seven stanzas, and our reading forms the last two stanzas, each with three parts (24-26/27-28/29-30 and 31-32/33-34/35a-d).

There are a number of interesting Hebrew insights in this reading. In verse 24, there are three clauses, in a chiasmic arrangement around a centre. The two outer clauses refer to God's works (“How many are your deeds, O LORD ... the earth is full of your wealth”), and the middle, declaring *how*—“all of them in wisdom he made.” The riches of God are shown in the fine tuning of creation and in the complexity of created beings. Elsewhere, Leviathan (v. 26) is sometimes seen as the great monster from the abyss (Ps 74:14; Job 41), but here it seems to be considered in its literal meaning of “twisting,” in reference to large sea animals like dolphins and whales that are often seen escorting ships. In vv. 27–30, the animals are described as sustained by the LORD—he has the power both to gather their breath/spirit (*ruach*), and so they die, and to give his spirit, resulting in their creation. It is *their spirit* whilst they breath, but *his spirit* to give, to create the animals and to renew the earth. The word used in Genesis 2:7 for the “breath” God breathed into the man's nostrils at his creation is a different word (*neshāmāh*, נְשָׁמָה).

Romans 8:14–17. Spirit of God and Sons of God. This passage is in the context flowing from verse 9, which states clearly that anyone (Jew and non-Jew) who does not have the Spirit of Christ, does not belong to Christ. So, put positively, every believer in Messiah has the Spirit of Messiah. Now the indwelling Spirit that binds us to Christ also energises and leads us in living spiritually, not carnally (vv. 10–14), so demonstrating personally and publicly that we are children of God. Our evidence of familial relationship with God is not through a sign in the flesh but through an inner testimony and our outward behaviour. This same Spirit gives us a deep inner witness that we are children of God, and we experience our spirits crying out the words: *Abba Father*. (*Abba* is Aramaic, which is what Jews would say, and *Pater* is Greek, which Gentiles would say). “The believer's assurance of salvation is based on the inner witness of the Spirit. The implications of this for one's soteriology are profound: The objective data, as helpful as they are, cannot by themselves provide *assurance* of salvation; the believer also needs (and receives) an existential, ongoing encounter with God's Spirit in order to gain that familial comfort” (NET, note 21).

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People Pentecost – Year C

The strong family relationship with God is emphasised in verse 17 with the three-fold use of the Greek prefix for “with” (*sun-*), in the words “co-heirs,” “co-suffer” and “co-glorified”!

John 14:8–17. The Paraclete with you and in you. Philip seems to ask for a theophany here (v. 8). Moses also asked to see God in Exodus 33 and was granted a limited manifestation. However, in this Gospel, Jesus explains that there is no direct revelation of God except through him (1:18; 5:37; 6:46; 14:6)!

The living *words* of Jesus (*rhēmata*, ῥήματα) are an expression of his Father's *works* (*erga*, ἔργα), and the works confirm who Jesus is (vv.10–11). The LORD had promised Moses that he would raise up a prophet like him and put his words in his mouth (Deut 18:18). Jesus is the Prophet like Moses. The miraculous works are clearly seen in the “signs” chosen by John in his Gospel (20:31), including the sign of his death and resurrection. And the works will continue in and through believers after Jesus returns to his Father. The “greater works” promised to his disciples cannot mean in terms of *quality* of miraculous deeds, as those seen in Acts are similar to those seen in the Gospels, but refer to the *quantity*! Because Jesus is going to the Father, the Holy Spirit can come and baptise every believer, and so the gospel can expand throughout the world and bring countless numbers to eternal life in the name of Jesus! Pentecost was just a start but a great example of the “greater works” promised through the disciples.

And the work of God will blossom through prayer, and specifically, “asking in my name,” which means asking in keeping with the divine nature. This term in verses 13 and 14 are the first references in John, but continue in 14:26; 15:16; 16:23, 24, 26, and not only through prayer, but also because of the Paraclete! This Greek word is difficult to translate into one word in English as it includes aspects of advocate, helper, guide and comforter. The root meaning is “one who draws alongside,” to act on one's behalf. The noun *Paraclete* does not occur in the Septuagint, but the root verb for consoling or comforting Israel does occur in Isaiah 40:1–2.

The Greek word for “another” is also significant here, as there are two words for “other” (*heteros* and *allos*) meaning “another of a different kind” and “another of the same kind,” and the latter is used here. So Jesus is sending another Advocate *of the same kind as himself*! If one considers all the references to this word (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 2:1; Rom 8:26–34) one sees that the Christian has Christ as his Paraclete with the Father, and the Holy Spirit as the Father's Paraclete with us! (Robertson). The reading finishes with an amazing statement to the disciples about the Spirit, literally, “alongside you he dwells, and in you he will be.” Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and right up to Pentecost with the disciples of Jesus, the Holy Spirit was *with* God's servants, resting upon them, but from Pentecost the Holy Spirit would be *in* them! What a striking difference Pentecost brings!

ACNA Reading

Genesis 11:1–9. Babel. The inclusion of the Babel story on Pentecost Sunday in the ACNA readings is largely explained above, with the Acts 2 reading. In particular, note the use of the word-play of *Bāvel* and *Bālal*. The term in verse 5, literally, “sons of man,” emphasises the ones who did this

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People Pentecost – Year C

building were mere mortals, not the lesser deities that the Babylonian culture came to claim built the city (NET, note 14).

Note the repetition of “Come, let us ...” in verses 3–4 of the builders and verse 7 of the LORD. *They* built *to ascend to the heavens*, so they wouldn't be scattered, but the LORD *comes down* to confound their language and scatter them. The use of the plural here by the LORD (“Let us ...”) could be an example of God speaking with the angelic assembly in heaven. The book of Jubilees tells of an angel who recounts this incident, saying, “And the LORD our God said to us ... And the LORD went down and we went down with him. And we saw the city and the tower which the sons of men built” (*Jub.* 10:22–23) (NET, note 19). These prideful people wanted to “make a name for themselves,” but we have seen in John 14 that Jesus tells us to “ask in my name,” and so glorify him. Contrast the prideful boast of the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14:13–14.

Human dis-unity and exile are not God's final wish, however, as the next chapter in Genesis shows. Whereas the builders of Babel sought “to make a name for themselves” on their own, the LORD in the next chapter promises to make Abram's “name great” himself (12:2). And whereas they feared being “scattered all over the world” (11:4), the LORD calls Abram out of Mesopotamia and promises him a land of his own (12:1, 7). Whereas the builders of Babel are cursed with an inability to understand each other (11:7, 9), the LORD blesses not only Abram but all those who bless him (12:2–3) (JSB).

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Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Pentecost – Year C

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