

Acts 2:1-21 and Genesis 11:1-9

GSM 28/9/14

[*read Acts 2:1-21*]



Have any of you had the experience of seeing something happen, in real life or on the TV, or hearing it on the radio and realising that you were witnessing a moment of history? [*Speak about 9/11 and 31 August 1997*]. On Thursday the week before last, the day of the Scottish referendum, I left for work whilst Jonny was watching telly before school and I said to him, today could be a day that is a historic day – the day that the United Kingdom becomes disunited. School children 400 years from now could be studying this day in history and wondering what you were watching on the telly this morning.

The Acts passage this morning is one of the big days in the Bible. What are the big events in the history of salvation? Creation. The Fall. The Ten Commandments. Jesus's death and resurrection. Then Pentecost. It's *that important*. The only thing that comes after Pentecost in the history of salvation is Jesus's second coming, final judgment and the new heavens and new earth. Why is Pentecost so important? The key thing about Pentecost is the coming of the Holy Spirit for all believers for the first time. Why is that so key? Well, this is what John Stott says:-

*“Without the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship would be inconceivable, even impossible. There can be no life without the life-giver, no understanding without the Spirit of truth, no fellowship without the unity of the Spirit, no Christlikeness of character apart from his fruit, and no effective witness without his power. As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead.”*

So this is a **big deal**. Because it’s a big deal, I want to make it more digestible. So what I want to do this morning is to split the sermon into two halves. In the first half I’m going to **do some doctrine**. “Doctrine” is the word we use for knowing what we believe. It can be quite heavy to do, so I’m going to try to make as easy as possible to listen to. But I think it’s important to do to make sure we’re on the same page. Then we’re going to have a break then we’re going to carry on with another bit, which where I want to share what I think God has been showing me about his plan of salvation with this passage.

So here goes. Let’s look at what this means for us in terms of core beliefs. I’m going to start by looking at the difference between God’s people in the Old Testament and God’s people in the New Testament with the Holy Spirit. Let’s take one of the most famous characters of the Old Testament, David.



Many of you will know the story. Here is a shepherd who has learned to trust God whilst he is out tending his sheep. Do you remember what David said when he went out to fight Goliath? 1 Samuel 17:37: “The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine”. This was a boy who trusted in God whilst he was still a shepherd. He had grown up trusting him before he was anointed as

a future king. But when David was anointed as king we read this in 1 Samuel 16:13 – “So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, *and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power.*” David is anointed and *then* receives the Holy Spirit. This is how the Holy Spirit came to God’s people in the Old Testament – the Spirit came to special individuals, selected by God, at special times. The Spirit was often accompanied by physical anointing with oil, where oil was poured over someone’s head to signify that they had been chosen by God. Otherwise God’s people did not have the Holy Spirit. When God was with his people, it was not in people’s hearts. Instead, God’s presence was represented by lots of things.



So, when the Israelites left Egypt they were followed by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God with them – but not in their hearts.



After Mount Sinai and the Ten Commandments, God's presence was signified by the ark of the covenant, the holding place of the two stone tablets that had the Ten Commandments written on them. God was with them, but not in their hearts.



When the temple was built God's presence was limited to the Holy of Holies, the inner part of the temple where only priests could go on special occasions and then only with special sacrifices being made. God was not accessible by everyone in the way we believe he is now.

What then happened when Jesus died and rose again? He took away the need for all the animal sacrifices that God's people had to go through to enable them to approach God. When Jesus died the curtain closing off the Holy of Holies in the temple was torn in two, showing that the way to God had been made open by Jesus's sacrifice. But how were Jesus's followers going to access God now if not in the temple?

Pentecost gives the answer. Let's look at the account in Acts 2. The first thing you notice is that there is no record of where Jesus's followers were at Pentecost.



Verse 1 says it was “in one place”. No indication that that place was anywhere special. So that’s lesson number one – in the past God’s people needed to be in the temple to be with God. Now there is no special place. If you are a Christian, then you have the Holy Spirit in your bed when you wake up. You have the Holy Spirit when you brush your teeth. You have the Holy Spirit when you put the bread in the toaster and when the toast pops up. You have the Holy Spirit on your way to church. You have the Holy Spirit in church. You have the Holy Spirit on your way home from church. You have the Holy Spirit on every day of the week whether you are eating, sleeping, working, resting, or whatever. You don’t come to a special place to get the Holy Spirit.

What else do we learn about the Holy Spirit? Well, that it comes in power.



Have you ever heard someone talk about someone who is unable to make a particular engagement and they say “I can’t make it to your party but I’ll be with you in spirit”. When that party happens, what is there of that person who can’t make it? People remembering him, maybe, understanding that he would want to be there. Nothing more. Here, the disciples experience the power of the Holy Spirit. A sound like a mighty wind, tongues of fire, talking in languages they couldn’t speak in a few moments previously. What’s the reaction of the crowd? Verse 6 and 7 – bewilderment and amazement. These weren’t people getting together and saying “Do you remember Jesus? I think, in a very real sense, that he’s with us now”. No – there could be no mistaking it – bosh! Huge sound, supernatural sights, miraculous powers of language. God’s Spirit is powerful.

Finally, let's look at the prophecy that Peter quotes from the book of Joel in the Old Testament. What do we learn from that?

First, look at the verb that God uses. "I will pour out my Spirit". Hands up who has done the ice bucket challenge. What happened? Were you slightly wet or very wet? Just like this [show Simpsons clip at

<http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=homer+simpson+ice+bucket+challenge&qpvt=homer+simpson+ice+bucket+challenge&FORM=VQFRML#view=detail&mid=621ADA69AB310B6F7BCC621ADA69AB310B6F7BCC>]. Sometimes we might think that God's Holy Spirit comes to us like a small glass of water. God's Word says differently. God *pours* his spirit onto us. This isn't a small amount of God. This is God drenching us abundantly.

Now look at who God pours his Spirit onto.



Remember in the Old Testament it was *special* people. Here? Let's follow the words through. Verses 17 and 18:

'In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit **on all people**.

**Your sons and daughters** will prophesy,

**your young men** will see visions,

**your old men** will dream dreams.

Even on my servants, **both men and women**,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,  
and they will prophesy.”

“All people ... sons and daughters ... young men ... old men ... men and women”. Anyone missed out? Anyone who isn’t entitled? Anyone who needs to do something special or be gifted or have a special experience? Skip ahead please to verses 38 and 39: “Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, 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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” What do the people need to know to receive the Holy Spirit? Repent and be baptised. Turn from your selfishness and make a public statement of your belief in water baptism. Now I don’t want to dwell too much here on the importance of baptism, but look what Paul *doesn’t* say in terms of what you need to do to receive the Holy Spirit. You don’t need to “feel spiritual”. You don’t need to “do good things”. And look at verse 39: The promise is for all whom the Lord our God will call. Everyone who decides to follow Jesus will receive the Holy Spirit.

Let’s stop there. I’ll pass to Anne then come back.

*[over to Anne]*

Do please keep Acts 2 open but now turn to Genesis 11. We’re going to read the first nine verses.

*[read Genesis 11:1-9]*

Who here is good at languages? Who here is terrible at languages? I came across recently some bloopers made by companies trying to sell their products in countries where things got a little lost in translation:-



In one marketing campaign, **Coors** put its slogan, "Turn it loose", into Spanish, where it was read as "Suffer from diarrhoea".



Scandinavian vacuum manufacturer **Electrolux** used the following in an American campaign: "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux."



# Gerber®

When **Gerber** started selling baby food in Africa, they used the same packaging as in the U.S., with a baby on the label. Later, they learned that in Africa, companies routinely put pictures on the label of what's inside, since most people can't read.



**Pepsi's** "Come alive you're in the Pepsi Generation" was used in China. Problem was, when translated into Chinese, it meant "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave".

The thing with languages is that you need to know what someone is saying or you can't communicate.



Last summer I was on holiday with my friend James, who some of you know. His passion is Citroen cars. He has a car which is an old model Citroen – don't ask me what type since I know nothing about cars – which he drove down to France where we were on holiday together. James speaks no French. But his car had lots of admirers in rural France. I would often find him standing next to his car, talking in slow English and shrugging a lot, whilst a local did his best to communicate his delight at James's car and ask him questions about how he did this or that – questions which James had no way of understanding or answering.

Language can bring together and language can drive apart. I want to contrast two instances, in Genesis 11 and Acts 2, where God affects the language of those on earth, because of what it shows us about God's salvation plan.



Have a look at Genesis 11. Here there are a bunch of men who are working together, in unity and co-operation. There is peace between the men and a common purpose – to build a tower. The reason they are building the tower is set out verse 4: “Come, let us build for ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we might make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth”. Man was wanting to reach God on his own terms. Does that ambition remind you of something? Maybe the lie of the serpent in the Garden of Eden when it told Eve that if she ate the forbidden fruit, she and Adam would be like *gods*. In building the tower, man was trying to reach God – and avoid being scattered. Mankind working together. Peace and common purpose. Something that lots of people think is a good thing in itself.

God thought otherwise. Verses 5-7: “But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other. So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth.” Man was trying to reach God on his own terms. If he succeeded in building the tower, then it would give him more confidence to try to reach God on his own terms. So God confuses their speech and scatters them. Man learns that he cannot reach God on his own terms. What started out in unity ends up in confusion. Man had one language before they started to build the tower and, before it could be finished, several. However much the mason putting the stone in place asked for his chisel, he couldn’t be understood by his helper. The architect tried in vain to explain how the top of the tower should develop, but all the engineer heard was babblebabblebabblebabble.

Back to Acts 2. What’s the picture in Jerusalem? A melting pot of different cultures, all speaking different languages. Verse 5: “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God fearing Jews from every nation under heaven”. All muddling along. Not many could understand the other. But then the Spirit comes. What’s the result? Verses 6 and 7. “Each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?”

Now who put up their hand earlier to say they were terrible at languages? You would probably be Galileans in those times because they had the reputation at being the worst at languages. They apparently found it hard enough to speak their own!



Then Peter speaks. What is to be the result of the Spirit being poured out? Verse 17: "Your sons and daughters will prophecy". Verse 18: "I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophecy". The result of the Spirit coming is that all believers will *prophecy*. How do you feel about that? What do you understand about what it means to prophecy? Now this is where things get tricky. There are two sorts of prophecy that aren't in play here. Firstly, the prophets in the Old Testament, who spoke God's Word directly to the people. That's not what this is about, because God's Word and the Holy Spirit now speaks to us. There is no need for an individual to be God's spokesman any more. Secondly, the sort of prophecy that is spoken about in bits of the New Testament. In Acts we see people called prophets predicting the future or telling believers what they believe God to be saying. But Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians makes it clear that that is a specific gift of the Spirit that is not available to all. So it's not that, because it's clear in verse 18 of Acts 2 that *all will prophecy*.

So we're all prophets. But don't worry if you've never had a "picture" or predicted the future. Because the meaning of "prophecy" here is different is different to what the word is taken to mean elsewhere in the New Testament. Here, prophecy means understanding and proclaiming God's word. It's basically what Peter goes on to do for the remainder of Acts 2, the bit we didn't read, where he explains about Jesus. It's what you do when you explain to your friends and family the great good news of the gospel. So, we will prophesy, in that we will understand and explain God's word. The result? Verse 21: "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved".

# GOD CAME DOWN

What do we learn from these two contrasting passages? Think back to the story of creation. The earth was formless and empty, darkness was everywhere. Chaos. Disorder. And the Spirit of God was hovering above the waters. God came down. And God said – let there be light, and sky, and earth, and plants and men and women. God brought order out of chaos. At Babel, man tried to reach God on his own terms. Genesis 11 verse 5 – God came down. This time, to bring chaos in their speech, as a judgment on man. At Sinai, God needed to show man his standards. So God came down and gave us the Ten Commandments, to show us his perfection, his great order. We couldn't match up to his standard, so, wonderfully and amazingly, God came down again in the person of Jesus to take our place in punishment and to fulfil the law. But still there is confusion and still there are people who need to hear the message of rescue by Jesus. So God came down at Pentecost to bring one message of salvation to all the peoples there. And one day, God will come down to gather his sons and daughters and people of every nation, tribe and tongue will proclaim his praise in one voice. That's what Pentecost looks forward to. What lies between that and now? Acts 1 verse 8: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth".

Praise God. At Pentecost we see the blessing of God in bring order to our chaos. When man unites to challenge God at Babel, God comes down and undoes their plans. When man submits to God, God comes down to unite and bless and save. God came down, God came down, God came down. We have an amazing God who does not stay remote, but God comes down. At Pentecost God came down to hold out a message of salvation to all who call on his name. And he sends us out to preach this one message in every language on the Earth, a message that Jesus has paid the price for my selfishness and yours and is offering us eternal life rather than eternal death – and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. That's the message proclaimed at Pentecost, and it's a message we proclaim today.