

Inside Out
June 8, 2014

Acts 2:1-21

It's eight weeks after Jesus' resurrection – a little over a week after Jesus' ascension, and there are all these devout Jews in Jerusalem for Pentecost.

Pentecost was, after all, a Jewish holiday – or holy day – before it was a Christian one, and in terms of people making pilgrimages, it was quite possibly the most popular.

Pentecost was a festival celebrating the spring harvest, the goodness and bounty of God. It was also a time of remembering the covenant – God's gift of the law – the promise God made to the people, and the people's promise to live accordingly.

Pentecost was a time of reaffirming the covenant and recommitting to it.

Among all these devout Jews in the city, there was a large number of Diaspora Jews – Jews who had fled Israel – who had dispersed, and for the last 620-some-odd years, had made their homes in diverse lands where they had established synagogues, made their homes and raised their children.

Those children had learned the languages of these places. And their children's children went to the local cultural events and museums and libraries.

Their children got involved in local politics. And Hebrew became a taught language learned from books and lessons, not on the playgrounds and streets.

Israel became a memory, a story of where they came from, of their ancestors and *their* ancestors in the faith.

At worst, Israel became just a story of a past home long ago; at best, a dream of home as it was supposed to be.

Now, a number of these Jews are in Jerusalem. Some, no doubt, just in for the festival; some who had actually relocated to Jerusalem.

Some spoke the language fluently; others were trying to reconcile what they heard on the streets with what they had learned from their studies.

And however overjoyed they were at being in the land of their ancestors, however much they reveled in seeing the places they had only read and heard about, there was this inescapable sense of how far they were from where they grew up – how far they were from familiar places where the language with which they grew up was the one they heard around them.

There had to have been an odd dynamic – being in a place they had called home, being in a place they had longed to get to, so they could finally be at home, and yet feeling like a stranger.

There was no one there with whom they had grown up. No one who knew their nicknames from grade school. No one who even spoke their language, not the one they learned on the playgrounds and streets.

Then, all of a sudden, every head turned, as each one of them heard the language of his or her own heart, being spoken in this place that was supposed to be home to them, but wasn't – not the way they had hoped it would be.

And they turned with suddenly brighter eyes. They turned with a smile.

They turned with some indefinable hope – not just because it was a familiar language, but because now *this* was the opportunity for everything to be perfect.

This was now the dream of things as they're supposed to be. *This* became the opportunity for home.

And what was the reaction of these Jews to hearing their own language? Acts tells us that they were bewildered, amazed, and perplexed.

Some were probably intrigued. Some listened. And we're told that some mocked the disciples and accused them of being drunk.

It is somewhat odd, don't you think, that they would call the Galileans drunk? It's not, as many might assume, and do even today, that they were babbling nonsense.

They were speaking in very understandable languages. Lots of them. Why would they be mocked for that? Why would they be called drunk because of that?

Particularly in my work with The Salvation Army and as a hospital chaplain, I've been around many, many drunks. If drunks make sense, you don't mock them!

Even if drunks are speaking clearly in a language you didn't even think they knew, that's no reason to mock. Marvel maybe, but not mock.

No, I don't think the disciples were mocked because they were speaking these foreign languages fluently. There was no denying, no mocking that. No, it had to have been *what* they were saying.

And what *were* they saying? They were speaking of God's deeds of power.

Given that it was the disciples, they could have been noting any of the acts of power that we read in the Hebrew Bible - what we call the Old Testament. Jesus taught them well.

But if this was a festival commemorating the covenant, then surely there were many recounting the story of the Exodus and the God who liberated the children of Israel and led them home to the promised land.

Surely many were talking about the God of power who appeared at Sinai in smoke and fire and thunder. So no one would mock that.

I think it's more likely that the disciples were talking about acts of power to which they were witnesses. They were probably talking about things Jesus did, and they probably mentioned the death and the resurrection.

They may have talked about the new life we can have in Christ Jesus and the implications of that for the kind of lives we are called to live. They may have talked about the last being first – about the master serving. They may have talked about dying to self in order to find the life that is life. Because the transformation of a human life was considered an act of power.

And here, some might mock. Those whose dreams had crashed around them – or those whose dreams had just kind of faded away – now confronted with these – these – what?

Idealists? Dreamers? Still hoping. Still talking about love and peace in a world in which violence and terror are viable alternatives to so many. Still talking about justice and righteousness in a world shaped by profit margins and ends that justify means. Ah, they're drunk. They'd have to be to keep believing.

But there were some, and still are some, who say, "Whatever it is they have – that's what I want!"

So what does all this mean for us today, 2,000 years later?

I think it's generally true that people are always looking to improve, to change their lives for the better. That's why there are so many commercials for diet and exercise products, beauty products, counselors and psychologists.

Even though many say they don't like change, the fact is that most people want to be changed for the better.

What is it about yourself that you would like to change? If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

Is it the way you look? Something to do with your health? Something to do with your level of expertise on a certain subject? What would it be?

Despite our protests, we are interested in change – for the better. And God is interested in change. God is interested in changing you.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, and as we take a look at what happened on Pentecost many years ago, we see that God changed many people's lives.

Two major changes took place on Pentecost. Change number one was what happened to the disciples.

We know from reading the gospels that the disciples followed Jesus as their leader, but they were still very confused about all kinds of different things. They still didn't fully understand Jesus' mission, why he had come to earth.

They were still wondering if Jesus would be an earthly king. They were confused, and as a result, they were timid. They weren't confident about sharing the Gospel with others. How could they be, if they didn't fully understand it?

But then Pentecost came. The disciples were together, when the sound of a blowing wind came down from heaven. What seemed to be tongues of fire settled on their heads.

Symbolic language? Very likely.

But, however it happened, no longer were the disciples confused. Now they understood the plan of salvation completely. No longer were they timid. Now, they were confident, speaking publicly.

Look at Peter – two months earlier he was so afraid that he denied Jesus three times. Now he was speaking to the crowd with confidence and understanding that he had never had before.

There was another change that took place on Pentecost, and you could argue that this change was more spectacular than what happened to the disciples.

After Peter preached his sermon on Pentecost, Luke tells us that 3000 people came to the faith and were baptized. Their whole way of looking at God, at themselves, at the world, at eternal life – everything had changed.

Now these people knew that they were at peace with God.

Pentecost can be summed up in one word, and I believe that word is change. We see the change that took place in the disciples, and the change that took place in those 3000 people.

Our world today needs change. You and I need change. We need the Holy Spirit to come to us, and change us.

Our problem is, we don't think we need to be changed in that way. "I'm alright the way I am," we say to ourselves. "What do I need to change about myself?"

The answer is, a lot. Yes, it's true, we are Christians, but we still have bad habits that we don't want to get rid of. We still have moments when we are selfish.

We still have moments when we completely misunderstand what God is telling us in the Bible. We still have moments when we fail to share our faith because we're too timid.

It is true that we have been redeemed by God in Christ, but we still need to change. We still need to become more and more the people that God wants us to be.

How does a person change his soul? You can't do it by trying to be a better person. That's like saying that there is something wrong with my car, but I'll try to change that by being a better driver.

You need someone to work on your engine, your soul. But the thing is, your soul is too complicated for you to fix yourself.

You need someone to fix it for you. And that someone is the Holy Spirit.

But how? On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came directly to those disciples. Today, no doubt he could do that if he wanted to.

But he no longer comes with the loud sound of a wind, or with what looks like tongues of fire, or with the ability to speak in foreign languages. Whatever happened that day was a one-time event.

Today, the Holy Spirit comes to us through Word and Sacrament. On the surface, it doesn't look like anything spectacular. But on the inside all kinds of changes are taking place.

And what happens on the inside then needs to manifest itself on the outside, by showing the world, as we talked about last week.

This is what the Holy Spirit does. It happened in some kind of miraculous, unusual way on that first Pentecost. Today, it happens as you spend time hearing the Word, as you see a baptism, or remember your own, as you take the Lord's Supper.

That's how the Holy Spirit changes people, changes us, turning us more and more into the person that God has made us to be.

The disciples had it on that Day of Pentecost over 2000 years ago, and lives were changed for the better. Let us be agents of change in our day, starting with ourselves. Receive it on the inside, then let it out!