

Pentecost: The Spirit and the Word give life

Based on texts from Exodus 32 and Acts 2

A sermon by Bob Mendelsohn
Given at Blackheath Anglican, NSW
27 May 2007

[The endnotes after the sermon are for internet information only and were not delivered in the sermon on the day]

Introduction

In the last year we watched the final video of Aussie sportsman Steve Irwin as death took the Crocodile Hunter. Yet if anyone knows anything about the man and the legacy he left, it will be a man who lived life to the full.

For most of us, life is a driving force, keeping and getting life, almost whatever the cost. That's a prime driver for humanity and for us as humans, amen?

Last Tuesday night in Bondi and in Jerusalem and in New York City Jews were eating blintzes and cottage cheese. They were reading all night and praying and learning the Book of Ruth. This is part of the celebration of Pentecost, Jewish style.

What was their motivation and what can we learn from their busy-ness and their thinking?

And what does God have to say to us as 21st century people about what gives us life?

Images of Mount Sinai

For that, we have to return 3,500 years to the point in Jewish and really world history, where God gave the Torah to mankind,

specifically to the Jews, then that the Jews might pass on the information to the rest of humanity.

The scene in Sinai was raucous to say the least. The book of Exodus unveils the scene as one of chaos. What's there? Look, there is fire and wind and a voice. Ezekiel 1 is read on Shavuot and it's designed to link with and show us the exaggerated activity of a storm, a wild storm, uncharacteristic storms of high energy and God's voice coming from within it.

“And as I looked, behold, a storm wind was coming from the north, a great cloud with fire flashing forth continually and a bright light around it, and in its midst something like glowing metal in the midst of the fire.” (Ezek. 1.4)

Later on in the Bible, the writer of Hebrews shows us even more of that scene and contrasts it with our Mt of Revelation.

“For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word should be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned.” And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, “I am full of fear and trembling.”

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. ... For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven... Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by

which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire.” (Heb 12.18-29)

What a scene of awe and fear. This is stuff Spielberg would love to create. This is massive cyclone and who knows the earthquake...what number, 7 or 8 on the Richter scale.

“And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount. And Mount Sinai was altogether on a Smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in Fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long (Tekiah Gedolah), and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake and God answered him by a voice. And the LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mount: and the LORD called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up.” (Exodus 19)

With all of Israel standing, quaking, and basically traumatized after 400 years of slavery, terror at the Red Sea, a narrow escape, and a month and a half of wandering in the wilderness, building the Golden Calf and thinking it's all lost, then they saw the lightning and thunder and great wind, and wondered if it was all over. I would have been afraid, and I imagine I'm not alone in this room.

Fear was on them. Moses returned and brought 2 tablets of stone. On them were 10 things. And God used those 10 things to define a constitution for the former slaves.

Listen, fire shakes things up. Earthquakes shake things up. We all need a good shake up now and then, don't we?

In most every paper the last few weeks are articles about Global Warming. Even today in Malaysia we read about Sunflower Electric Power Corp. finding itself in a political furnace for wanting to build two or three coal-fired plants next to the one already rising from the

Great Plains in southwest Kansas in the USA. I believe that Sinai was one of the first places of Global Warming ever recorded. And God was heating things up for Israel and on Israel that we as Jews might take a renewed, invigorated, 'on fire' religion and go to the nations.

The Spirit came on the church as a fire; he came onto Jesus as a dove. Jesus needed no cleansing; we are desperate for it.

Go to the Nations with God's Tongue

The idea of mission is present in the image of the harvest. Harvest can be a positive and a negative image. John the Baptist is reported to have used the grain harvest to speak of judgment: burning up the chaff after saving the wheat. The idea of gathering in the harvest belongs to the expectation that when God's reign is to begin, there will be a gathering of all God's people for the new beginning. Many will come from east and west and north and south and feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of God (Luke 13:28-29; Matt 8:11-12). Sometimes it also included the hope that the Gentiles would also come, like birds coming to make their nests under shrubs of mustard bush. Jesus told other parables about harvest, the best known being the parable of the sower, expressing a defiant optimism about what God would do, despite the apparent failure of so much seed to take root.

The early Christians saw themselves participating in this great climax of hope. Paul appears to have developed his strategy of visiting the cities of the world (of his time) and bringing an offering from the Gentiles to Jerusalem against this expectation. His apostleship played a role in the divine plan of bringing in the Gentiles.

One could comment on the languages of disobedience which occurred at Babel vs. language of obedience and faith that is the unified purpose and love of the Pentecostal people.

God offered the Word to 70 nations, but according to the story they declined. Then the old joke is that God offered commandments to the Jewish people and Moses said, "how much do they cost?" God replied, "They are free". Moses said, "I'll take 10!"

Luke tells us at beginning of Acts 2 that there were people from every nation. This reflects the 70 nations believed to exist. And sometimes they were called 70 tongues, since a nation usually is defined not by geographic borders, but by its language.

If the story is right, 70 nations were offered the Torah; they refused. As a result of Pentecost, the 70 nations will hear the Gospel.

It is significant to note that a Jewish commentary on Exodus, recalling chapter 10 of Genesis, which sketches a map of the 70 nations which were then thought to comprise humanity as a whole, leads them back to Sinai to hear the word of God: "At Sinai the Lord's voice was divided into 70 languages, so that all the nations could understand" (Exodus Rabbah 5, 9). So too in the Lucan Pentecost, the Word of God is addressed to humanity through the Apostles, in order to proclaim "the mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11) to all peoples even with their differences. A clear overcoming not only of national differences, but of the Tower of Babel problem resident on humanity, the inability to speak at peace with one another.

Recently I was in Melbourne, and upon arrival at the airport I rang a Jewish woman I'd met on the phone a year before. She is a

Mendelsohn and when our team was cold calling Jewish surnames, I rang her and dozens of others. She seemed interested and I marked her name as such on our computer. So on arrival I wanted to meet up with her. She was open and had a friend, Alice, come by from next door. Alice is a Baptist, and wanted to know how Jews, Jesus and Jews for Jesus went together.

Now my new Jewish contact is originally from Scotland, and although I've traveled the world, I had a very difficult time understanding her accent. Sure, her words were English words, but they were foreign sounding to me. It was her dialect (a Greek word meaning 'tongue' and used in Acts 2 of what the disciples received that day) that threw me off.

Long story short, Jane prayed with me to accept Jesus that afternoon. She is reading her Bible now and Alice is helping her. They are going to be looked after by a church which meets just around the corner from their flats. God is good!

What Babel evidences, the inability of people to speak with each other, Pentecost overcomes as people from 70 nations can hear the same words in their own language and respond in faith, amen?

Tongues divided the world in Babel; tongues unite the world in Pentecost.

And remember what the 120 did when they got the Holy Spirit that Pentecost day? They went downstairs and outside and preached so that the 3,000 could find eternal life. We hear the Gospel; we respond and believe and we go to preach it.

What is in our hearts comes out our mouths. Jesus said, “For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.” (Matthew 12.34) If you believe in Jesus and have a relationship with him you will speak about him to others. And they will hear and learn and some will come to faith in Jesus.

Conversion and Pentecost

One point to mention about this holiday is the uniqueness in relation to sin. At every festival the Torah informs us that one has to bring a sin offering. Only on the festival of Shavuot is the word 'sin' not mentioned. Why? “For on the festival of Shavuot, the day of the receiving of the Torah, all Jews are like the convert "newborn", and so free of all sin.” (R Levi Yitschak of Berditchev)

What R Levi Yitschak means and what we mean may be different. Let's be clear. We all need to be cleansed of sin. We all need shaking up. And in Pentecost we have God calling us to listen, to hear his words in whatever languages, and to be born from above. He wants to fulfill His words of Jeremiah 31. There God predicts through the ancient prophet,

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them, “declares the LORD. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

“And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbour and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of

them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (31.31-34)

This new covenant is God's promise. This new covenant is enacted on Passover, seven weeks before Pentecost when Y'shua took up the 3rd cup during the seder and initiated it. And in his dying and rising from the dead, we can all be forgiven of our sins, we can all be converted, we can all know God. It's a new covenant, not like the covenant of Moses (the Old covenant). This is conversion in the best sense of the word.

And why do we read the Book of Ruth. The rabbis say we read Ruth because King David, her descendant, died on Shavuot and because Ruth was a convert and at Sinai we were like converts. God transformed us from ordinary people to a special nation.

Conversion brings life, not death

In Exodus 32 we read of the return of Moses with the 2 Tablets of the Law. And the Jewish populace was behaving riotously and the brother of Moses, Aaron, lied about how the Golden Calf incident happened. Moses was angry and invited the people to join him. The sons of Levi did (Moses' tribe too) and that day the text tells us, "So the sons of Levi did as Moses instructed, and about three thousand men of the people fell that day." (Exodus 32.28)

Now if you know much about Bible, you know the precision of biblical numbers is a worthy study itself. For instance, exactly how many men came out of Egypt from each family and each tribe? No round numbers here; no approximations. Even after the Resurrection, Peter goes fishing and catches 153 fish. (John 21.11)

So it's very surprising to read the phrase "about 3,000 men" in Exodus. Is it random? Not at all.

Acts chapter two, our principle text today, shows us that as a result of the preaching of Peter, Jewish people interrupted his sermon and said, "What shall we do?" (Acts 2.37) and Peter told them to repent and get baptised and get filled with the Holy Spirit, for the 'promise is for you, and your children, and all who are far off' (This means the Jews, the Jewish families, and Gentiles). And who responded? "So then, those who had received his word were baptised; and there were added that day about three thousand souls." (Acts 2.41)

No coincidence here. What brought death in Moses' day brought life in Peter's day. And to the exact number of people.

And Paul made a point of this in 2 Corinthians 3.

"Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how shall the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?" (3.5-8)

So the Spirit brings life and the Law brings death. But let's be too simple here. What we mean by Spirit always contains Scripture. What we mean by Law contains more than Scripture. Here's what I mean.

The Law is a checklist system, with requirements and guilt for failure and pride for satisfaction. It starts in the Scripture, but goes past its intent. The Spirit (as Paul used the term) is God's word enabled in our lives. It's the requirements of the Law put into our hearts of flesh. (Jer. 31).

Spirit without the Word is Emotionalism; Word without Spirit is legalism.

But together, they are what Paul calls "Spirit" and we could say, "The Spirit and the Word bring Life." Jesus said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life." (John 6.63)

That's it...that's how we win in this messianic life. We trust the Spirit and God's Words; they bring us life. Beaconsfield miners may tell us how they got on for a fortnight in their cage a kilometre below ground, the story and legacy of Steve Irwin will continue to be told, but what you and I can count on is that those who trust Jesus and are anointed with his fire and word, enter into life and live it to the fullest.

About 3000 folks can live; 5,000 the next day (Acts 4) and who knows how many in Blackheath or in Sydney or Melbourne or around Australia will hear God's word and live, even today? Let's be out sharing this message. Let's go out and tell. Amen?

[end of sermon]

Endnotes:

BIBLICAL HORIZONS

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The Blessing of Abraham

by Peter J. Leithart

“According to Galatians 3, Abraham heard the gospel when the Lord promised that “all the nations shall be blessed in you.” Paul quotes here from Genesis 12:3, but the context puts an odd slant on the Old Testament text. Galatians 3 starts with a series of rhetorical questions about the Galatians' receipt of the Spirit (vv. 1–5), and the first section of the chapter ends with a reiteration of this theme (v. 14). Thus, verses 1–14 are focus on the question of how the Galatians received the Spirit. What does the promise of international blessing have to do with this? More pointedly, verse 14 implies that Abraham was promised the Spirit: Jesus endured the curse of the tree “in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” “We” here refers, as elsewhere in Galatians, to Jewish believers (cf. 2:15–17), so that the blessing of Abraham to the Gentiles is connected with the gift of the Spirit to Israel. In Galatians 3, the gospel preached to Abraham was the good news that the Spirit would be poured out on Israel, and, in conjunction with this, blessing would flow to the nations.

But what does the Abrahamic promise have to do with the Spirit? One searches in vain for any explicit reference to the Spirit in the Genesis account of Abraham's life. It might be argued that Paul is using “promise to Abraham” in a broader sense; instead of referring to something specifically said to Abraham, he has in view the accumulated promises to Israel, beginning with Abraham and climaxing with the prophets. This interpretation, however, severely weakens the force of Paul's claims. He says that this promise was pre-preached (proeuaggelo) to Abraham himself, and this is crucial to Paul's argument, since he is insisting that Abraham's trust in the promise is a paradigm for the Galatians (vv. 6–7). Moreover, Paul connects Genesis 12:3 fairly directly with the promise of the Spirit. For Paul, the promise that the nations will be blessed is a promise

that the Spirit will be poured out. When the Lord promised that Abraham's seed would bring blessing to the nations, the Spirit was implicitly promised as well.

How is this the case? Several features of Luke's account of Pentecost clarify and deepen this line of thought. As Sinclair Ferguson points out in his fine book *The Holy Spirit* (Contours of Christian Theology [Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996]), Acts 2 is modelled on Genesis 10–11. Like Genesis 10, Acts 2 contains a "table of nations" (vv. 9–11), and like Genesis 11, Acts 2 records a miracle of language. These parallels serve, of course, to highlight the contrast between Babel and Pentecost. While the diversity of tongues at Babel divided and disrupted the nations, the diversity of tongues at Pentecost had the opposite effect of joining all nations into one people. The gift of the Spirit thus implies that all tribes and tongues will confess Jesus as Lord; the outpouring of the Spirit is for the purpose of gathering of the nations. Further, in Genesis, the call of Abraham and the promise that the nations will be blessed through him follows immediately after the division of the nations (Genesis 12:1–3), so that, as many commentators have pointed out, the call of Abraham is Yahweh's solution to the problem of Babel. That is to say, the promise is Abraham's seed will unite the nations in blessing. Pentecost thus fulfils the promise to Abraham, namely, the reversal of the curse of Babel and the restoration of harmony among nations under the rule of Abraham's Seed -- through the outpouring of the Spirit.

Taking a wider perspective, throughout the Old Testament, the promise of the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit on Israel is one stage in a sequence of events that invariably includes the judgment and/or conversion of the nations. Joel 2:28–32 comes immediately after a prophecy Israel's restoration from a devastating locust plague (2:18–27) and immediately before a prophecy that the nations will be judged and harvested (3:1–17). The outpouring of the Spirit promised in Ezekiel 36:26–27 comes in the middle of a prophecy of Israel's return from exile, the reunion of Israel and Judah, the rebuilding of the temple, and opening of a spring in Jerusalem whose living water flows to the ends of the land. In Isaiah 32:9–20, the reversal of Israel's fortunes occurs with the outpouring of the Spirit, and part of the promise is that Israel will live in peace and security (vv. 17–18), which obviously means that Israel's enemies have, in one way or another, been taken care of.

Zechariah's promise of a Spirit of grace and supplication (12:10--13:1) leads into a promise of victory over all enemies and the gathering of the nations to the Feast of Booths (14:1-21). When the apostles announce that the promise of the Spirit has been fulfilled, this element of Israel's hope cannot be isolated from the other aspects of that hope. To say that the Spirit has been poured out means that Israel is being restored to fertility and life and that the nations are being gathered to Zion. The Pentecostal gift of the Spirit to Israel is the first fruits of the harvest of nations.

“<http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/bh/bh115.htm>”

in God there are no foreigners, there is no one on the outside. God understands every language.: May 30, 2004

Pentecost

The Rev. Dr. Greg Rickel

St. James' Episcopal Church

<http://www.stjamesaus.org/Kalendar/sermonae/20040530.htm>

Erasmus, the famous Renaissance scholar, once told a classis story which was designed to emphasize how important it is that we take up the torch of Christ's ministry with great commitment. In the story, Jesus returns to heaven after His time on earth. The angels gather around Him to learn what all happened during His days on earth. Jesus tells them of the miracles, His teachings, His death on the cross, and His resurrection.

When He finishes his story, Michael the Archangel asks Jesus, “But what happens now?” Jesus answers, “I have left behind eleven faithful disciples and a handful of men and women who have faithfully followed me. They will declare My message and express

My love. These faithful people will build My church.” “But,” responds Michael, “What if these people fail? What then is Your other plan?” And Jesus answers, “I have no other plan!”

Josephus wrote of the large crowds in Jerusalem for this feast (Antiquities 14:337; 17:254; Wars 1:253; 2:42–43). These Jews would come to the city from throughout the Roman Empire, and kingdoms beyond. The number of visitors at Pentecost was probably smaller, although still substantial.

Philo (20 B.C.–A.D. 50), a Jewish philosopher from Alexandria who lived at the same time as Jesus and Paul, said that there were "vast numbers of Jews scattered over every city of Asia and Syria" (Embassy to Gaius 245). He claimed that there were about a million Jews in Egypt, though historians think his figure is inflated. But no one doubts that the Jewish population of Alexandria was quite large, whatever its numbers (Flaccus 43, 55).

"The supernatural display of languages at Pentecost was a harbinger of the dominant feature of worldwide evangelism to be

realized in the new age and was a sign to the Jews that the Holy Spirit had been given to work out in believers Christ's glorious salvation purchased on the cross and to equip them to proclaim the wonderful message of this salvation to every creature under heaven." [Merrill F. Unger, New Testament Teaching on Tongues (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1971, page 34).]

When Jesus sent out the disciples as a trial before Pentecost, he first sent 12 disciples, symbolising that the Gospel was first to be preached to the Jewish nation (Matthew 10:5, Mark 6:7, Luke 6:13, Luke 9:1). Then he sent out 70 disciples (Luke 10:1,17) to symbolise that later the Gospel should reach to all the Gentile nations.

What about the odd use of the number 72?

This number had no significance in the Old Testament, but around the time of Jesus, there was a move to change the number for the Gentiles to 72 from 70, because the number 70 had a positive meaning to the Jews as the number of rulers. They suggested to give the number 6 times 6 times 2 to the Gentiles. Gradually the number for the Gentile nations changed from 70 to 72. This is why the Greek manuscripts do not agree whether it was 70 or 72 disciples Jesus sent out in Luke 10:17. It probably was 70, but in any case, it refers to the future preaching to the Gentiles.

http://72.14.203.104/search?q=cache:0HrKDy_2nFMJ:https://mail.jaars.org/~bt/numsyml.rtf+70+nations+pentecost&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=27&client=firefox-a

Why is Shavuot called "The Time of the Giving of the Torah" as opposed to "Receiving the Torah"? It is because on the sixth of Sivan was the time of the giving of the Torah, more than three thousand years ago, but the time of the receiving of the Torah never ceases; every day a Jew has to receive the Torah anew.

(Chidushei HaRim)

The Midrash says that the Torah was given to us in three stages: through fire, through water and in the desert [the voice]. These three stages are symbolic and they teach us how one merits the Torah. Fire: the fiery arousal of longing for their Father in Heaven that burns in the heart of the Jew; water: moderation, contemplation and clarity of thought, to think in the ways of Torah, in the right spirit and mind; desert: doing without all the pleasures and desires of this world that hinder the person in reaching perfection. (Shem MiShmuel)

A great emphasis is placed (see Ex. 19:18) on the fire that accompanied the Giving of the Torah. This teaches us that all matters concerning Torah-study, mitzvah-observance, prayer, and every manner of serving and acknowledging G-d, must be carried out in "fire": with vital warmth, and with flaming desire to fulfil G-d's will. Our power to do so is derived from the fire on the mountain that burned during the Giving of the torah.

(based on Sefer HaMaimorim 5701)

The Torah was given on a mountain, to teach that the learning of Torah and going in G-d's ways should give us a certain emotional elevation. At the same time one has to be careful not to fall prey to arrogance. That is the meaning of 'opposite the mountain': to be exceedingly careful to oppose the aggrandizement that can come from Torah learning and knowledge. (Maimarim Taf Shin Gimmel)

THE FIRST SHAVUOT took place on Shabbat, fifty days after the Exodus from Egypt, on the sixth day of the month of Sivan, 2448 years after the creation of the world (May 9, 1313 BCE), 3313 years ago. That day, at the break of dawn, G-d spoke the Ten Declarations.¹ Although the entire fifty-day period was a time of purification², the most intensive preparations were started on the first day of Sivan, when the entire Jewish nation arrived at Mt Sinai. Similarly, each year G-d gives us the Torah anew on Shavuot. In utilizing the final six days properly by reliving the events of that momentous time, we prepare ourselves physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally to receive the Torah anew.

¹ Literal translation of "Aseret HaDibrot." The popular rendition, "Ten Commandments," is somewhat misleading, since a careful reading reveals 13-15 mitzvot, depending on how you count (a popular topic for scholarly debate!)

2 Today too it is a mitzvah, Sefirat HaOmer, to count these days.

A blessing (printed in every siddur) is recited each night before counting.

Universal vs particular. God dealt with individual Jews in the OT;

He poured out his spirit on all people in the NT.

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Birthday of the church vs. John 20.21. (in vs. upon)