Christ in the Feast of Pentecost:

The Spirit and the Word give life

Based on texts from Exodus 32 and Acts 2

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**Greetings**

**Introduction**

We watch the news and almost daily there are natural disasters which cause us to shake our heads. We wonder if the world will stop shaking and quaking. Whether it was Beaconsfield in 2006. Or Christchurch in 2011. Trapped miners. Earthquakes. Fukishima Japan.

Natural and unnatural disasters happen, and many of us are used to that, but now and then worried about them. Especially if our children or grandchildren are near the epicenters.

For most of us, life itself 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?

The Jewish holiday of Pentecost takes place in May/June each year. And during that time Jews will celebrate it by eating blintzes and cheesecakes. By staying up all night reading and praying and learning Torah, especially the Book of Ruth.

What is 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 (the first five books of the Bible) to mankind, specifically to the Jews, then that the Jews might pass on the information to the rest of humanity. Pentecost is called the ‘Time of the Giving of the Torah.” Why ‘giving’ and not ‘receiving?’ Because every time we listen to the Bible read here at church or in our private devotions, on Christian radio, or wherever, we ‘receive’ the Bible’s truths. One time, God gave it, but each subsequent time we as individuals can receive it again.

The scene at Mt 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 that same day, on Pentecost (which we call “Shavuot” or “Feast of Weeks”) 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.

Ezekiel says, “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 Stephen Spielberg would love to create.

“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, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spoke 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) You get it.

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 sanctuary.

Fear was on them. Moses returned and brought 2 tablets of stone. On them were 10 phrases. And God used those 10 words 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? I even heard some commentator reviewing why the tornadoes are going on in the US in large measure…he referred to Global Warming.

**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 stories are many about Jews and the Giving of Torah. OK, they are jokes about Jewish people and although they are funny, I’m running low on extra time this morning, so write me and I’ll share some with you.

The quickest is, “God offered the Word to 70 nations, but each said no. He came to the Jewish people and offered us the Torah. Moses said, “How much for the 5 commandments?” God said, ‘they are free.” Moses replied, “I’ll take 10.” By the way, I can say that joke; I get worried if you do.

 Luke tells us at beginning of Acts 2 that there were people from every nation. This would reflect 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.

According to the rabbis, all of the 70 nations thought to exist 3500 years ago were offered the Torah; they refused. But, as a result of what we read in Acts 2, what happened on Pentecost, those same 70 nations were able to hear the Gospel.

Let me mention the Tower of Babel. That is where God came down to confuse (that’s what the word “Babel” means) all the people by creating national languages. At that time everyone was speaking the same language. But after Babel, everyone spoke different languages.

It is significant to note that a Jewish commentary on the book of 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). I’m not sure how the rabbis sorted that out and can prove it. In all my reading, I’ve never seen Hebrew as a universal language. If anything, the problem of Babel is aggravated by Sinai.

However, 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.

You might think I have an accent, but I’ve lived and worked in Sydney for 21 years having moved from New York City. And eight years ago my wife and two of my kids passed our citizenship exams. So this is now officially an Australian accent.

A few years ago 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 to my visiting 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 travelled 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, June prayed with me to accept Jesus that afternoon.  She is reading her Bible now and Alice is helping her. She is being 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) In fact 15 times in the Newer Testament, people are filled or the phrase is used “filled (or baptized) with the Spirit” and each time what follows is speaking. 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,  7 weeks before Pentecost when Yeshua 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 due to its harvest/reaping motif and originally this was an agricultural holiday. They also 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.

And why do we eat dairy products? The word of God is likened to “milk and honey” and we eat to remind ourselves of that sweetness.

**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 baptized 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 baptized; 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. ‘About 3,000!’

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.

Paul uses the term ‘The Law’ to mean 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 transitory life. We trust the Spirit and God’s Words, they bring us life. Fukishima plant technicians and Beaconsfield mine survivors, and Christchurch earthquake survivors all share victories of still breathing, 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 Hobart or in Sydney or around Australia and Israel will hear God’s word and live, even today?

Pentecost is not Passover. On Passover we are forgiven. On Pentecost we are empowered to live out and proclaim the Gospel. Let’s be out sharing this message. Let’s go out and tell. What do you say?

AFTER a video is shown

When you give, you are joining us in proclaiming the Gospel to our Jewish people, and to the 70 nations and to anyone who is listening.  Thanks for that participation.

If you are not yet a believer in Jesus, today can be your day. On this day in history, God poured out His Spirit on 120 waiting folks, not sure what was about to happen. And maybe that’s what you are feeling. What will happen if I give my life to Jesus? What will happen if I join this mob? The adventure for you may be unique, and yet will contain some of the following: joy in being forgiven of your sins, a desire to know God on a personal basis, power to share what you believe with those who don’t yet believe, and a longing to be with Jesus one day down the road. For you I’m excited. Today, take Him as your Lord, repent of your sins, and receive His forgiveness. Then tell one of us, won’t you? We’ll rejoice together with you and help you walk this out one day at a time.

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