

HIW 19.05.2013 – Whit Sunday

Acts of the Apostles, Ch. 2, vv. 1-18

“Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ... When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? – We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!’”

Today is the day generally known as Whit Sunday; people with a close connection to the Church *might* call it by its correct name, Pentecost. This is the eighth time I have preached at Hannover International Worship, but the first time I have done so on one of the major Christian festivals. For a layman like me, this is clearly a challenge of a special kind – to find something worth saying, and worth listening to, about a key story or event that everybody knows all about anyway. But then I thought: surely I must have something to say about this story, being a professional interpreter! So I decided to give it a go. Whatever it was that happened on that morning in Jerusalem, we interpreters may feel ourselves to be fortunate that - as far as we know - it only happened once: otherwise we would be out of work, or our profession would not even exist.

At the Kirchentag in Hamburg two weeks ago, we attended a Bible Study by Fulbert Steffensky on the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. In the course of his exposition, Steffensky said that he could not believe in the reality of miracles that contravene the laws of nature; that if God sometimes intervened and suspended the laws of nature in such ways, it raised the question as to why he did not do so more often. This would apply, for example, in the classic “Where was God?” situations, to save people from natural disasters, or in cases of illness. My personal view is that the question “Why would God perform a miracle to save one person and not save millions of others?” is certainly a difficult one; but no more difficult than the “Why me?” question - Why does God allow one person to develop an incurable disease in the first place, while others do not? I am quite prepared to believe that God does indeed intervene in his

world at key moments, and that this moment on the day of Pentecost, after Christ's resurrection and ascension, was one such. By "key moments", however, I do not mean only ones we can read about in the Bible, and which as a result have become, as it were, public events. I am sure that God also intervenes in secret and in the private lives of people, and that such unknown events may equally play a key role in his purposes for the world. After all, "the spirit blows wherever it pleases" [Jn. 3:8], and none of us can know or predict where that will be.

However, the event of Pentecost that our text tells about was very much a public one. The story owes much of its forcefulness to the striking contrast with the situation and state of mind of the Apostles before it. Just recently – it must have been around Easter – my wife and I heard a sermon in which the preacher drew attention to the fragmentary feeling about so many of the resurrection stories recorded in the Gospels – brief appearances of Jesus, who however disappears as soon as he is recognised. This happens even in the case of the very clearly drawn story of the meeting on the road to Emmaus [Lk. 24; 31]. Despite the repeated emphasis on the physicality of the risen Lord – as when he asks the disciples for something to eat, as in St. Luke's account [Lk. 24; 41-43], or invites Thomas to put his hand into his wounded side, as in St. John's Gospel [Jn. 20; 27] – little is told of meaningful communication between Jesus and the Apostles in the time between his resurrection and his ascension. The Emmaus story is an exception, and so is St John's account of the meeting by the Sea of Galilee - the occasion on which Jesus asks Peter three times "Do you love me?" [Jn. 21; 15-18], giving him the opportunity to reverse his threefold denial before the Crucifixion.

But in that story there is another thing that strikes a chord with me; and that is the way it starts. The Apostles have returned to Galilee, as Jesus (according to Mark [Mk. 16; 7] and Matthew [Mt. 28; 10]) had told them to do. Having got there, they appear to be sitting around on the shore of the lake, not knowing what to do next, when Peter suddenly says "I'm going fishing" [Jn. 21; 3]. It is as if he wants to say: "Come on, lads; it was great while it lasted, but it seems to be all over; we're back home now, and we might as well get back to work." It has

that feeling, which I too know well, of the week after the Kirchentag. It has been a great experience; we have heard the word of God proclaimed in a thrilling and inspiring manner; we have experienced community and togetherness in a shared ideal and vision; and we go home with the resolution that what we have experienced must make a difference in our lives, the resolution to live out Kirchentag at home and in our own parishes: and then what happens? The pressures of everyday life take over; we are surrounded by people who have not shared our experience and cannot understand our enthusiasm; and we just do not know how to go about it.

So it must have been with the Apostles after the Ascension. The great experience is still glowing within them; yet they are waiting, and do not quite know what for. They have their expectation. They know that the Lord is risen indeed; and they have his promise: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth” [Jn. 14; 16-17]; or “Wait for the gift my Father promised. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit” [Acts 1; 5]. There is a feeling that they need to be ready for whatever is coming, a feeling expressed in the way they pull themselves together and set about choosing Matthias to fill the gap in their ranks left by Judas Iscariot [Acts 1; 26]; but what exactly *is* coming, what form it will take, and what is expected of them when it does, seems very unclear.

And then the day of Pentecost comes; fifty days, or seven weeks, after the Passover, the next major Jewish festival, the harvest festival. The Apostles are back in Jerusalem (or in St Luke’s version, differing from the other Gospels, they had never left it [Acts 1; 4]); and as at the Passover, when Jesus was crucified, the city is full of visitors, there for the festival – and not only people from round about, but from all parts of the Jewish diaspora as well. And then it happens. Fire comes. The image of fire to express the power of the word of God is of course not new: “Elijah the Prophet burst forth like a fire, and his word burnt like a torch” [Ecclus. 48; 1], we are told in the apocryphal book generally known in English as Ecclesiasticus, but also called the Wisdom of Sirach; and

John the Baptist himself had said: “I baptise you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” [Lk. 3; 16]. The Apostles, touched by the Spirit, catch fire. And the crux of the story is that this fire, felt individually, is communicated to the crowd of witnesses, springing over to start a great conflagration, “setting the world on fire”, as we say, and while burning, also bringing light.

In short, the core of this episode lies in the fact that it is a communicative experience. People from every imaginable region of the Mediterranean and Eastern worlds – 15 such regions are mentioned, but the list is surely not meant to be exhaustive – hear the word of God preached in their own respective languages. It is not totally clear whether Luke intends us to understand that the Apostles were actually speaking all these different languages – just like that, without the long years of study that we interpreters needed to achieve competence; or whether he means that while they spoke their native Aramaic, with the characteristic Galilean accent that identified Peter to the High Priest’s servants as a follower of Jesus [Mt. 26; 73], the people in the crowd *understood* them in their own languages. That would be as if each had a private Babel fish in his ear: if you know the science fiction fantasy “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy” you will remember the Babel fish, taking its name from the Tower of Babel where according to the Book of Genesis [Gen. 11; 9] the multiplicity of human languages originated: it is a small creature that feeds on brain wave energy, converting brain waves directly into language and thus providing simultaneous translation between any languages. – But that is science fiction!

I tend to take the first view, that St Luke believes the Apostles did speak a multiplicity of languages, because then clearly nobody in the crowd would understand *everything* they said, and that would explain why some thought the Apostles were drunk, even though it was only 9 o’clock in the morning. But whichever way it is meant, what matters is that the fire sprang across; that communication took place. That the truth of God, the truth of Jesus Christ, found a way to cross all barriers of language, nationality, background and culture and

unite all who were ready to receive it. Babel fish or no Babel fish, in this episode the confusion of languages is overcome, the legacy of the Tower of Babel is reversed. There is neither Jew nor Greek, or one might add neither Parthian nor Mede nor Elamite, nor Libyan from the parts near Cyrene, but all are one in Christ Jesus [Gal. 3; 28]: and yet within this unity, each retains his or her own individuality, his or her own identity. For they all hear the word of God in their own native language, and one's mother tongue is a fundamental and essential element in identity. Preventing people from using their mother tongue is a classic act of political oppression, while enabling people to hear the word of God in their own tongue is an act of liberation.

In my opinion, what happened at Pentecost has nothing to do with the phenomenon known as "speaking in tongues", that we know on the one hand from references elsewhere in the Bible, in particular Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, and on the other hand from various revivalist movements in the course of Christian history and from the modern-day so-called Pentecostal churches. That "speaking in tongues" is an ecstatic outpouring in what appears to be a language unknown either to the speaker or to those who hear him, except for a few who claim to be able to interpret it. From the First Letter to the Corinthians we can deduce that it was very prevalent among the church in Corinth and was considered one of the gifts of the Spirit; but Paul, while not denying this and claiming himself to speak in tongues more than anyone else, is clearly rather doubtful about the phenomenon, or at least about its usefulness. Paul writes:

"Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no-one understands him. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you all prophesy. ... Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me ... I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue." [I Cor. 14]

Indeed, it is precisely in this context that Paul calls on us to seek instead the greater gifts, the greatest of which is love; without love, he says, “speaking in the tongues of men and of angels” [I Cor. 13; 1] is of no value.

Speaking in tongues, then, does nothing to reverse the legacy of the Tower of Babel, but rather reinforces it by spreading incomprehension. The fire of Pentecost is something quite different, and remains a one-off event. Fortunately for us interpreters, it was the one occasion on which we were not needed.

When I started looking in my hymn-books for Whit hymns that would be suitable for this service, I found that there were few that took up this central element of what I wanted to talk about – the symbol of fire springing over to start a great blaze. I have seen examples of Christian art, particularly Eastern ikons, in which the tongue of fire is used as a symbol of the Holy Spirit; but the more familiar symbol to us is the dove: not the Communicator, but the Counselor, or Comforter, depending which translation you prefer; not the force going out into the world, but the inward presence giving strength and assurance to me personally. In another sermon my wife and I heard recently, the preacher interpreted the Holy Trinity as follows: God the Father is God above us; God the Son is God with us; God the Holy Spirit is God in us. I like that; but on the Day of Pentecost I feel I need to add to it and say that God the Holy Spirit is also God through us. Not just a gentle dove dwelling in my breast; but fire going out from me to set the world ablaze. Peter quotes the prophet Joel:

“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. I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.” [Acts 2; 17-18; Joel 2; 28-29]

The church of the Holy Spirit, then is a church of visions, of dreams, and of prophecy. Do not misunderstand the term prophecy: prophecy is not fortune-telling, prophecy is not simply predicting the future; prophecy is proclaiming the truth of God as we believe it will one day become manifest in the world, even if the reality of our present world looks very different. And the Spirit is unpredictable and incalculable, it blows where it will - as we heard in today’s marvellous

Old Testament text [Num. 11; 10-17,24-29], in which the Spirit rests not only on the seventy elders it was supposed to rest on, but on two others as well who were not supposed to be part of this particular show. Inevitably, this arouses objections from people who prefer things to be well-ordered and predictable: “Moses, stop them!” But Moses replies: “I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!” [Num. 11; 28-29]. The words are almost the same as those of Paul: “I would rather have you all prophesy” [I Cor. 14; 5]. This is the Spirit of Pentecost, blazing like fire, going out into the world and taking hold of all of us.

Pentecost is often referred to as the birthday of the Church. It is the day the Church came alive, in the same way as, in the beginning, Adam had come alive: “The Lord God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” [Gen. 2; 7]. The Holy Spirit is the soul, the breath, of the Church – remembering that in both Hebrew and Greek, the same word is used for “breath”, “wind” and “spirit”. We all know the words “I have a dream”. A church without this spirit, without visions, dreams and prophecy, would be like a person without a soul, without that that makes us alive. In the Church of the Holy Spirit, each of us must have our dream; each of us must be a prophet, proclaiming our vision of God’s truth for a better world, the world God wants us to live in here and now. Each of us must be touched by fire, and through us, that fire must spring over to the world outside. May this vision last beyond the Kirchentag!