

“The Gift of Understanding.”

It's usually the case that, when I'm thinking about that first Day of Pentecost— which was the subject of our first reading— two things usually come to mind. First, I think about all that noise, and those tongues of fire. Our first reading described it in this way:

... suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.

Isn't that one of the craziest thing you've ever heard? It's easy for me to wonder what that must have been like. And over the centuries artists have tried to depict the event, much like the ancient illustration I included on page 6 of your worship booklet. Now let's be honest: don't those tongues of fire atop each person's head look a bit like little gas jets? And that's one of those images which you can never un-see; I can almost guarantee that you'll be thinking of little gas jets the next time someone mentions the Day of Pentecost.

So, when that first Day of Pentecost is the topic of conversation, it's those tongues of fire, and that noisy wind, that are what usually first come to mind.

But the second thing I usually think about, is what happens next in our reading from Acts, and this is how it's described:

[The disciples] were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

How cool is that? Even though those disciples are simply your ordinary run-of-the-mill Galileans, all of a sudden they're each able to speak in a foreign language. And what's even cooler is the fact that— though they were

talking in different languages— each was talking about the same thing: about “God’s deeds of power.”

That’s the second thing I usually think about, when I’m thinking about that first Day of Pentecost.

Now, what I’m about to say comes as something of a confession: Until fairly recently, that’s *all* I thought there was to that first Day of Pentecost: the noisy wind, the tongues of fire, and the Spirit-filled disciples speaking in foreign languages. That’s all I thought there was to it. But now, I’m convinced that these were only the prelude to what that day was *really* all about. Remember what our readings says next:

Now there were, staying in Jerusalem, God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.

I now believe that the *real* point of that first Day of Pentecost was this: On that day, the Holy Spirit enabled people from different countries, and with vastly different backgrounds, *and* who spoke different languages, *to finally understand each other*. And I’m talking about more than just language here. And for that reason I believe that one of the great gifts of the Holy Spirit, on that first Day of Pentecost, was the gift of understanding.

Scholars will describe it in this way:

The gift of Pentecost— the gift of understanding—
overcame the curse of Babel.

I’m sure you all remember the story of the Tower of Babel. It’s in *Genesis*, and it describes a time when all people spoke the same language. And it’s a story that tells how human ambition, and human pride, came together to build a great city, with a tower that reached up into the heavens. And the reason for this monumental construction was simply because they could; and so that they could make a name for themselves.

However, God realized that this would not end well, and so, the end result of their hubris was that God confused their languages, and those

people were unable to communicate with each other, and therefore unable to finish their project.

It's likely that the ancient story of the Tower of Babel was used to explain why the various nations had their own languages. But it probably also became a story to explain why there might have been enmity or distrust between the peoples of those various nations. Because it's easy to be distrusting of people whom you can't understand when they speak.

For example, we've probably all been in this situation: We're someplace where there are groups of people around us. And over there is a group speaking in a language we don't understand. And all of a sudden they start laughing, and so we look over at them, and at about the same time they start looking over at us. And we start to wonder: "Are they laughing at me? Why, yes, I think they *are* laughing at me. How dare they laugh at me. I think I must destroy them!"

But people don't just have to speak a different language from us, for us to be easily suspicious of them. We can find almost any reason to distrust people, from the way they're dressed, to the cut of their hair, to the neighborhood where they live.

But on that first Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit's gift of understanding enabled people to look past their differences, and look instead to their similarities. And all of a sudden, people who were once strangers, could actually understand and appreciate each other. And what's more, the first thing they were talking about was the wonderful works of God.

Now, for me, that's impressive. But even more impressive was the fact that this gift of understanding did not diminish the diversity of that crowd. The people did not cease to be Medes, or Persians, or Elamite, or what have you. They were not reduced to some homogenous collective. They did not become *less* than they were; rather, they became more than they had been, and for this reason: Because, they began to realize that they were now part of something larger than themselves; something greater than their ethnic or national identities. They were now part of a world-wide body of people who heard and understood that God was alive and active in the world, and that God was eager that they should support and participate in his mission and ministry. And that's exciting stuff!

Now, what was the outcome of this gift of understanding on that diverse group? Near the end of Acts chapter 2, we find this description of their new, Spirit-enabled life:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.

It's for this reason that the Day of Pentecost reminds us that the gift of understanding is also the gift of unity. It's a unity with people who are sometimes vastly different than us, but who can still agree with the message that God is alive and well, and still at work in the world. It's this gift of unity that gave birth to our Church, and which sustains it to this day.

On that first Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended, and, for a little while, human differences were overcome by understanding. On that day, all those different people heard the good news of God in Christ, and they were changed; they were never the same again.

On *this* Day of Pentecost, may you receive the Spirit's gift of understanding; may it assure you of who you are, and whose you are. And as that gift transformed those people in the first century, may it continue to transform us in the twenty-first century. And finally, may that gift work with us, and through us, to transform the world.

Amen.