

Acts 2:1-21

To fully understand the wonders of Acts 2, — specifically the fire touching each disciple and the speaking in tongues — we need to look at it through the lens of the first few chapters of the Bible. The Bible is a story of brokenness and remaking, and that first Pentecost Sunday was a key moment in the remaking.

As you know, the Bible's story begins with creation, and then the garden of Eden and the first sin — the first disobedience. According to early Genesis sin led to exile from Eden, which also meant exile from God's presence. Adam and Eve no longer knew intimate connection with the Lord God. Things got worse quickly — the first murder, disintegrating morals and standards. Finally in that quasi-mythical early section of Genesis we have the tower of Babel, at which point God confused the people's languages so that they could no longer understand each other — and they scattered. Brokenness leads to scattering.

In many ways it was not that God confused them, but they confused themselves. You see, Babel was about pride. Pride is a turning in on yourself, and putting yourself first. It is disconnection with the world and disharmony. Pride leads to the failure of empathy. In pride we no longer see other perspectives than our own — we're not speaking the same language any more.

The rest of the Bible narrates the beginning of remaking of the world. First we have the Exodus story, in which God's people are united once again under God's law, given at Sinai. This was the beginning of a remaking, but only the beginning. God drew his people together — all of Israel — to hear his word, and to be guided by him in how they lived their life. But this was also an assembly at a distance: They did not walk with the Lord, they were at arms length. Anyone who set foot on Sinai apart from Moses died. They were not ready for God yet. But there was a distinguishing mark of God's presence — the people were guided by a fiery pillar, God descended on Mount Sinai in fire, and then, when they had put together the tabernacle, his presence descended on this.

Centuries later, we have the reuniting around the Jerusalem Temple. This was a more permanent location for the worship of God. After its construction and dedication the presence of the Lord fell on it, and it was understood that God was literally present in the Holy of holies, the innermost area. This was the place where heaven touched earth, where God's heavenly throne-room met his earthly throne-room.

The temple was the place of reconciliation with God, and a place of pilgrimage. But both here, and on Mount Sinai, the Lord God was noticeably distant. The law, and reconciliation with God did something to enable people to assemble again, at peace, but it also highlighted how much could not be achieved. They were not remaking the broken world.

The brokenness of the world was not simply because of the one off event in the garden of Eden. It was an ongoing, worsening problem, because brokenness is the result of sin, and specifically pride, and the way that these disrupt our relationships with God and with each other. Remaking the broken world required a new spirit to inhabit all people — not the spirit of pride, but a spirit of humility, goodness and love.

The whole trajectory of the story was leading to that day described in Acts 2. What humankind could not achieve, God could, by putting a new spirit into his followers — the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the spirit of love, of goodness and humility. The Holy Spirit enables a connection that was lost right back at the tower of Babel.

So, in this scene God's presence is accompanied once again by fire, just as at Sinai, and in his presence in the Jerusalem temple. But now God is no longer in one place... God is wherever the faithful are, present in every believer. Every single believer is the temple of God. Every single believer is God's throne-room. Every single believer is the place where heaven touches earth. God's connection multiplies and multiplies. His kingdom grows and grows.

And remember what happened at the tower of Babel? In their pride the people built a temple to their own egos and their connection with each other was broken — lost in its own pride. Now,

on the birthday of the church, suddenly the faithful began to speak in tongues — and people *heard* for the first time. *Pentecost is the undoing of the tower of Babel.*

So, to recap, God's presence has been signified by fire on numerous occasions in the Bible — not least the fiery pillar, and God's fiery presence on Sinai — and now he was present *on people*.

The first sin escalated into full scale brokenness, fully realised at the tower of Babel in the confusion of languages, and the brokenness of relationships but this is undone at the coming of the Holy Spirit, that Pentecost morning.

So is that job done? Not quite. God's presence in his followers dramatically 'powers up' the remaking of the world, but we are painfully aware that the world is not yet remade. Where does the trajectory of the story take us? It takes us towards a unity of all people, through the Holy Spirit.

This unity must be achieved through church — the deliberate, actual gathering of God's people together. This unity must eventually be inclusive and ecumenical — it must overcome theological, cultural, ethnic, age, and sexual difference. It must overcome religious differences. Trusting that the Christian faith is uniquely right, there must come a time when followers of other faiths find Christ and turn to him. And it must overcome the half-heartedness we sometimes show towards the faith we ourselves believe in.

The Holy Spirit may seem a deeply scary thing at times. While God is God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we can feel nervous about the Spirit in ways we don't about Jesus or the Father. But we must get over that. If we cannot trust the Holy Spirit to be a good thing, what or whom can we trust?

And so let us pray again for the Holy Spirit to fill the church anew, that we can really talk, and really connect, and that the world may really connect with God.

Amen.