

Pentecost and Duolingo

8 June 2025

Acts 2:1-13 and John 14.8-17

(drawn from / quotes from NT Wright: The Challenge of Acts)

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

“Pentecost? Ah yes - talking in tongues!” my friend said... How should I respond to that?

The problem is that this comment neatly encapsulates two of the challenges we face in understanding and in expressing our faith:

1. Cliché Stories – stories and events from the bible which are so ingrained in our culture, which are so familiar, that it becomes difficult to think about what they actually mean; and
2. The Atomistic Approach – we spend most Sundays looking at a sliver of a dozen or so verses of one book of the bible ... as if trying to work up from a few cells of an elephant under a microscope to an understanding of the whole creature. Does that make sense?

So let’s go back and look at the very basic building blocks of our faith. These are a necessary framework within which we can get a better grasp of this Pentecost celebration. We are going to approach Pentecost from the top down. Even though I’m a fan of Duolingo – I’ll have you know that I have a 1379-day streak – we are not going to be talking about that. We are barely going to mention talking in tongues.

And one more thing ... we are going to ‘do’ theology, not anthropology or sociology – we are going to think first about God, not about us.

The bible begins with the verse “*In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth ...*” The bible begins by telling us that God is the sovereign creator of all things. It begins by setting out God’s authority over all things.

But then quite quickly we are introduced to a strange feature of God – God is relational. He isn't content to live in His cloud contemplating His creation, He relinquishes the absolute control that such distance would give Him, and He seeks to be in relation with His creation. But for the all-powerful creator of the universe, He chooses a very strange counterparty for this relation – humankind. Us! Why strange? Because humankind is complicated and keeps getting it wrong and doing stuff that is plainly not right. And yet throughout the Old Testament our relational God speaks, listens, guides and disciplines His people.

In Chapter 11 of the book of Genesis the story of the Tower of Babel gives an example of how challenging this relationship is for God. The difficulty in question is what some wag termed the unholy trinity: us, ourselves, and we. The people of Babel said “*Come, let **us** build **ourselves** a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let **us** make a name for **ourselves**; otherwise **we** shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.*”

God opposes this introspective and self-confident – this relationship-defeating – initiative. He does it in this story by sowing confusion among the people of Babel, making everyone speak different languages.

I'm sure you will appreciate how our Pentecost reading today offers a mirror image to this story. The story of Pentecost is the opposite of the Tower of Babel story. While the story of Babel is about a group of self-confident people thinking about themselves, the story of Pentecost is about God coming to a group of people who felt anything but self-confident. They felt confused, afraid, defeated ... but God's Spirit made them all-powerful, able to reach out and communicate the Good News to anyone, no matter what language they spoke or culture they came from.

God confused the people of Babel by making them speak different languages – and He brought the people of Jerusalem together when, through the power of His Spirit, everyone understood the disciples ‘*speaking about God's deeds of power*’. Paradoxically, when humankind thinks inwardly about protecting itself, everything gets confused, and when we think outside of ourselves,

when we are led by the Spirit of God, harmony is possible and what divides us can be bridged.

But let's return to our very basic building blocks: the last feature of the Old Testament that I'd like to highlight is that it describes the promise given by God to His people – God will redeem His people.

The New Testament then follows on and does two things – first it describes the fulfillment of God's Old Testament promise in Jesus, and secondly it describes how the people who first followed Jesus lived in the Kingdom which broke in under Jesus' kingship.

Put differently, as we think about the relationship between God and His people, we see that the Old Testament tells us about the Father – His plan, His promises; and the New Testament tells us about the fulfillment of those promises in Jesus Christ, the Son. And throughout all of Scripture we see the Holy Spirit, first hovering over the water at the beginning of Genesis, right through to empowering the people of God to inhabit the Kingdom of God at Pentecost.

The “theology not anthropology” point is that the ‘great overarching story of Scripture is not about how humans get to go upstairs and live with God’. It is about our relational God's intention to come and live with us and even in us. So the point of Pentecost is not simply God giving his people a fresh injection of spiritual energy so that they can speak foreign languages, evangelise, teach, perform remarkable healings and so on. The point is the homecoming of God: God doing what He had long intended and promised. Having come in the person of His son to fulfil the messianic predictions recounted in the Old Testament, God now comes in the person of His Spirit to fulfil the promise to dwell in and with His people on earth¹. To help them live in His Kingdom.

The gift of tongues, of being able to be understood across all language groups, therefore has nothing to do with people reaching a new level of spiritual maturity and even less to do with Duolingo. It is a sign of God's

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presence not the people's skill. It shows how the Spirit is the core of the new Kingdom, which is built around God. It is a sign of the action of God as He promised. And it is the launch of the worldwide Church, constituted then and there as a small working model of the new creation.

The good news (literally), is that the Spirit is how God now acts through us – so that henceforth it is no longer a question of our own strength or ideas, as the builders of Babel imagined – but a question of God's strength, God's direction, as the fearful and apparently defeated disciples discovered on that day 2000 years ago.

Because before Jesus brought about God's Kingdom, rules and rituals were used to bring people close to God. In the new kingdom, brought about through Jesus' death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit has come to bring people close to God. And not just those who followed certain man-made rules - all people.

The book of Acts is replete with stories of how Paul, and to an extent Peter, were arguing with those who clung on to the idea that the Messiah of Israel was only for Israel – specifically only for those who followed the rules - “the law” (circumcision, purity laws, etc). Paul realized that what was radical about the new creation brought about by the death and resurrection of Christ was that it was the Holy Spirit which held the key to the kingdom, not our rules.

That sounds great – but it means that the Pentecost story must necessarily challenge our ideas of who “belongs” in the Church. The story of Pentecost tells us that while our rules, our community, may help us in walking with God, they are absolutely not the only way to walk with God. It is the Holy Spirit who offers access to God.

So, yes, the story of Pentecost tells us that we are called to speak the gospel in “many languages”: culturally, generationally, practically – but this is so that the Spirit can do its job, which is to bring people closer to God to receive His gift of grace. It is not about us being able to speak foreign languages or talk in tongues – this is a mere means to the end.

God's Spirit speaks to everyone. Everyone and everything can come together around God's Spirit. We must seek to reflect that in this community saying: Come, whoever you are, and hear this in your own language. You are welcome here. We not only include everyone but accept everyone to whom the Spirit speaks, everyone who receives God's grace. There is that grace word again: Grace is shorthand for God's love reaching out to those we imagine to be morally undeserving, to those who don't follow our rules and who don't think like we do. The gospel of Grace humbles all human pride – it is unflattering, humiliating, but beyond that it is above all a life-giving message.

Of course, the world doesn't much like Grace. Many people don't like it. Because it challenges systems, ideas, all notion of human control. It challenges our vengeful sense of justice. If we take on this spirit-centred life, the principalities and powers - of whatever sort – governments, social media groups, political parties - will write us off as naïve or worse or they may warn us not to shove our religion down their throats. We must not lose our nerve. We are people of the renewed covenant. We are the family of the Messiah, marked with His powerful name in our baptism. We have been filled, we will be filled, and filled, and filled again with the Spirit. We are called, corporately as this church family and each of us individually, to be a sign and foretaste of the Creator God's ultimate purpose. A sign and a foretaste of the new creation, of the Kingdom of God. In the meantime, empowered by the Spirit, our task is to tell the Good News of Jesus Himself, our crucified lord, risen, reigning, returning².

Amen

² NT Wright