

---

## *Pentecost! It's About Translation*

[Click here for the podcast](#)

**The Very Reverend Sam G. Candler**  
**A Sermon at The Cathedral of St. Philip**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**The Feast of Pentecost**  
**Acts 2:1-21**

*How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?  
,in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.  
-Acts 2:8,11*

It's about translation.

Pentecost is about translation. So, today, at the Cathedral of St. Philip, I want to give thanks for translators.

The first Christian Pentecost must have been plenty dramatic. I cannot say exactly what the tongues of fire must have been, those charges of energy that seemed to be atop the heads of the early Christian disciples. Dramatic, of course!

But I do have an idea of what many languages speaking together must have sounded like. What we just heard this morning (speaking the Sunday gospel in ten different languages, all at once) might be a small example of that first Christian Pentecost.

Imagine what an extra-powerful microphone from outer space might pick up if it was pointed at the earth. It would not hear just one language, but thousands of languages and dialects. And it would hear not just human sounds, but all sorts of groans and calls and songs from all God's creation. Maybe a bit like that opening sequence in the movie, *The Matrix*. Ever since the Tower of Babel, we have known that there are thousands of languages in the world. What we have not known is what all those languages are capable of saying.

Today, the great miracle work of the Holy Spirit is the work of translation. I know there are other works of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is that power of God that inspires us and charges us for service. The Holy Spirit teaches us, consoles us, loves us.

But the Holy Spirit also translates for us. The Holy Spirit is the One who enables us to hear one language and translate it into another. I know that this takes work; good translation takes work. So I salute all of you who have studied vocabulary lists and verb endings. You have a gift. You can take what is expressed in one language and express it for another culture.

Translation is the great miracle of Pentecost, and it may also be the great power of Christianity. One of Christianity's most distinctive features is its ability -and, indeed, its requirement<sup>™</sup> to be translated! Christianity wants to be expressed in other languages!

This is the excellent point made by the Christian scholar, Lamin Sanneh, in his masterful book, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*. He claims that Christianity can make disciples of all nations precisely because Christianity is not restricted to one culture or language or style alone. "No culture is so advanced and so superior that it can claim exclusive advantage to the truth of God." (page 25).

Lamin Sanneh reminds us that worldwide Christianity has always used the language of the vernacular. Christianity was never limited to the official and formal languages -like Greek or Latin. He writes that "Christianity spread as a religion without the language of its founder -in striking contrast, for example, to Islam." (page 25) "Christianity invested in idioms and cultures that existed for purposes other than Christianity." (page 25)

Good translation is work that requires academic rigor and scholarship. But it also takes the Holy Spirit. We have all heard translations, for instance, that seemed literally correct but emotionally stupid. We have heard translations that got the letter of the law right, but missed the spirit.

Do you think I am speaking, this morning, only about academic theory and linguistic ability? I am not. Today, the great translators in this room today are not just those who spoke in different languages a few minutes ago.

In the Spirit, in the Holy Spirit of God, all of us are translators. For instance, I have little idea what these new born babies mean with their crying or movements. But their mothers do. Watch their mothers and their fathers. They are translating every minute. The work of mothering and fathering is always about translating - taking the old customs and traditions and truths and translating them to their children. Taking the custom of baptism and translating it to children.

And translation goes in the opposite direction, too. Parents translate the primitive language of their children into an understanding of what their children need. (That can be great fun! But then parents face the challenge of adolescent translation.)

A wife, right now, is trying to translate, trying to interpret, the silent movement of her husband. What does he mean? What is he trying to say?

A man across the room is translating a woman's avoidance and why she does not return his calls. He is beginning to get the picture.

This past year, teachers in Sunday Schools have been translating scripture, once again, into language that children can understand. Bankers and lawyers and developers and businesswoman are translating their vision into one that can be understood by their neighbors, by society.

Today, however, in the Christian Church, we are gathering all that translation together in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. What makes any translation holy is when that translation points to the power of God.

That is what the onlookers exclaimed on that day in Jerusalem:

"How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." (Acts 2:8-11).

We hear them speaking about God's deeds of power!

That is the sign of Pentecost. It is not just the drama of fire and foreign tongues. The Holy Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, will always be speaking about God's deeds of power.

In fact, that will always be the sign that someone is speaking, someone is translating, in the Holy Spirit. They will be speaking of God's deeds of power. They will be speaking peace in the same way that Jesus left his disciples peace. They will

be speaking truth, in the Spirit of truth, which Jesus said will abide in us believers (John 14:17).

And all of us, all of us, have the power to speak that truth, to speak that peace, to speak of God's grace. On the Day of Pentecost, we celebrate God's gift upon each and every one of us - from the youngest to the oldest. We can speak love to each other. We can speak of God to each other. We can speak truth to each other.

That love and truth and power may have to be translated. Our neighbor might not get it at first. We might not get it either. And sometimes our words and actions will fail us. We may get the translation wrong.

But on Pentecost, we get the translation right. Whatever we say, on whatever occasion, from the challenges of business to the moodiness of adolescence, from the complexities of relationships to the wailing of children, the word of God will be truth, power, and love. The translation in all these languages is that God loves us and empowers us to love one another.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

Comments? Contact Dean Candler at: [SCandler@stphilipscathedral.org](mailto:SCandler@stphilipscathedral.org)