
Speaking in Tongues on Pentecost

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler**

No matter how often we prepare people for the moment, sudden confusion and bafflement and even anxiety and panic are part of our annual Pentecost experience at the Cathedral of St. Philip.

As most but not all parishioners know by now, we feature a special moment at the Cathedral during the reading of the gospel on Pentecost Sunday. Our liturgy, of course, is usually quite beautiful and intentional. At its best, it lifts our souls to God. At its worst, beautiful and deliberate liturgy can also become precious and dry. I hope, as we all do, that our Sunday prayers and music are of the type that lift our souls to God!

At any rate, most people realize that the Sunday services of the Cathedral are meant to be precise and well-organized. When we process the gospel book into the main aisle during the sequence hymn, the congregation turns and faces the perfectly upright acolytes and gospeller. We await the words of our Sunday gospel.

However, on Pentecost, the gospel takes a suddenly chaotic turn. As soon as the gospeller announces the gospel in English, well-placed and rehearsed parishioners begin proclaiming the gospel in languages other than English. We have heard everything from Spanish and French, to Swahili and Greek and Latin. The effect does not sound well-placed and rehearsed at all! Visitors have remarked that they were afraid and anxious: something was going wrong in the beautiful Cathedral liturgy! People were speaking who were not supposed to be speaking! And they were saying weird things!

What we are trying to reproduce, of course, is the drama of that first Christian Pentecost, as described in The Book of Acts, 2:1-4. "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And 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. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

On that biblical day, there definitely was sudden confusion, bafflement, anxiety, and even panic! The Book of Acts says the crowd was bewildered and amazed, while some sneered that the speakers were drunk with new wine! It was chaotic.

But the miracle was this: The gospel was proclaimed in foreign languages, and yet people heard the gospel in their own language. The miracle was not in the proclaiming. The miracle was in the hearing!

That is what we try to observe at the Cathedral of St. Philip. Each of us does proclaim the Christian gospel in our own way, in our own "language," if you will. And, often, our own way and our own "language" sounds odd to our neighbors. But, in the grace of God, and, indeed, in the Spirit of God, our neighbors hear one gospel! They hear it in their own native way.

This is the challenge of the entire Christian Church in our day. Each of us, inevitably, has a distinctive way of knowing God and of knowing Jesus Christ our Lord. But it takes the Holy Spirit to communicate that gospel in such a way that others can understand it.

Today, cultural norms and traditions, and even cultural "innovations," look like barriers to Christian communion to some folks. For instance, how can that Christian Church act one way, and another Christian Church act in a different way? The answer is that we need the Holy Spirit to do the translating. We need a Pentecost moment if our prayers are to turn from chaos to inspiration. This Sunday is Pentecost; pray for the Spirit of graceful interpretation to be with us!

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