

A Sermon by the Rev. Roger Wm. Smith on Whitsunday, the Day of Pentecost, June 12, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Speaking about God's Deeds of Power

Part IV in a series of reflections on the words in the Eucharistic Liturgy (The Communion Service)

Text: Acts 2:11 "...in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

It was the Day of Pentecost, a day when the Israelites celebrate a harvest festival called *Shavuot*—when they were given the Ten Commandments. The disciples, all of them faithful Jews, were together in one place, when suddenly they heard the sound like a tornado. They looked at each other in astonishment and there on the heads of each of them they saw what seemed to be a flame of fire. That's why we wear red on this day.

Having been, as it were, set on fire and filled with the breath of God, these men and women began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. The people standing by were amazed and cried out, "In our own language we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power!"

That was the first in a long series of events that have made it possible for the whole world to hear about God's deeds of power—*God's love and power*. It marked the beginning of the globalization of information.

A couple of years ago our granddaughter Annie Gemmer was studying in Venice. We were visiting at her home in Portland, Maine at the time. Her mother told us she was going to skype Annie. "Skype?," said I, "What in the world is that?" Wait and see, said our daughter. And in a matter seconds, on the computer screen there was Annie live!

All the way from Italy, there was our beautiful granddaughter talking to us in Portland, Maine. This was our first exposure to this latest electronic marvel. It seemed like magic.

It reminded me of Dorothy in the Land of Oz.

On her second trip there she met Ozma, the new queen of Oz. Ozma was much more of a wizard than the Wizard himself. She had this magic picture which enabled her to see live anyone in any place in the world. And when Dorothy went home to Kansas, she and Ozma agreed that at a certain time each week, Ozma would bring up Dorothy on her magic picture and if Dorothy made a certain kind of signal, the queen would run some magic through her and bring her back to the Emerald City.

As we all know there are times when the weather in Kansas can be pretty awful. When things got really bad, with the help of the magic picture Dorothy escaped back to the Land of Oz. That story was written by Frank Baum in 1907. Could it be that this imaginative writer of children's books foresaw the magic picture we now call Skype?

Between that Day of Pentecost long ago and the present electronic age, many things have developed that have helped us spread the word more efficiently.

Thanks to the *Pax Romana*, along with the amazing Roman road system, it became possible for word to travel across the Empire in a matter of days. The Apostle Paul took advantage of that.

What happened is that the messages in the books and letters and poems that we now call the Holy Bible began to be heard all around the world. The Good News became globalized.

As this happened these sacred words came to be incorporated into the Eucharistic Liturgy. They are now what we call the First & Second reading, the Psalm and the Gospel. The readings appointed for each Sunday and holy day are listed in a lectionary printed in the back of the Prayer Book.

Usually the first reading is from the Old Testament, the second is part of one of the letters that the Apostles wrote to their congregations, and the Gospel reading is all about Jesus. It is required that there be a reading from one of the Gospels at every Communion Service. And since it is all about Jesus, we stand for it.

We announce it with the words, "The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew" (or Mark, Luke, or John—there are just 4 of them). And the response to that announcement is "Glory to you, Lord Christ".

You may remember that we talked about that word "Glory" several weeks ago. It is an expression of honor, adoration and thanksgiving. We regard it as a great honor to hear this sacred message.

When the Gospel has been read, the reader says: "The Gospel of the Lord" and the response is "Praise to you, Lord Christ". The word Gospel comes from the old Saxon word Godspell. It means "good news". It tells of God's deeds of love and power. And for that we praise God. We might shout glory, glory Hallelujah.

Another development leading to the further globalization of this Good News took place in 15th century Germany. Johannes Gutenberg came up with a method of printing using movable type. In 1455 he printed the Bible. Up until then, all bibles had to be written by hand. The monks in their monasteries labored over this, and it took many months to make one copy. They were written on parchment, and they were very rare and very expensive. Only the very wealthy could afford them.

Gutenberg's invention made it possible to publish Bibles and other books, making them available at an affordable price to people around the world. This development was as revolutionary in the spread of information as the internet has been in our time.

On the Day of Pentecost, the people from around the world who were in Jerusalem marveled because they heard Jesus' apostles speaking in their own languages about God's deeds of power...telling the good news in a way that they could understand.

Language is important. It says in the first chapter of John, "In the beginning was the Word". The ability to speak in languages is unique to the human family.

At this time of the year we have flocks of birds in our neighborhood. They are singing their little hearts out. We hear Mother Wren's aria here. And soon after in another part of the woods Father Wren sings back to her. The cardinals are now bringing their young to our feeder. They seem to have a larger family than ever. That beautiful love song they sing in the early spring seems to have done the trick. Birds and beasts all have a language, but nothing quite like the languages of the human family. One of the gifts given us that make us in God's image is the gift of speech.

In the western world, from about the 5th to the 16th century AD the Bible was written in Latin. That was the language of the Roman Empire, but throughout the Middle Ages, except in the liturgy of the Church, people stopped using Latin. So very few people knew what they were hearing when the Bible was read.

When the Scriptures were translated into their own languages the people were astonished at what they found there. They had been brainwashed into believing in a fierce god, who wanted nothing so much as to throw all sinners into the fires of hell. The God in the Gospels, they learned, was not like that at all. He was a loving & gracious Father, the giver of all good gifts, compassionate and forgiving. In reading St. Paul's letter to the Romans, Martin Luther made the astonishing discovery that God's love was available to us all. It could not be earned. It was freely given to all who had faith in God. "The just shall live by faith". (Romans 1:17)

So Luther and the other reformers set about translating the Bible into languages that the people understood. It was like a second Pentecost. It made it possible for the message to be ever more clearly proclaimed throughout the world.

In our Catechism we learn that the Holy Scriptures are called the Word of God "because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible."

And on this day of Pentecost, it is helpful to read again what the Catechism says about the meaning of the Bible. "We understand the meaning of the Bible *by the help of the Holy Spirit...who guides the Church in the true interpretation of the Scriptures.*" (Book of Common Prayer, pages 853-4)

And let's remind ourselves of those words in today's collect: "Almighty God, on this day you opened the way of eternal life to every race and nation by the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. Shed abroad this gift throughout the world by the preaching of the Gospel, that it may reach to the ends of the earth..."

And getting back to the Pentecost of the present age, I can Google "The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible", and there it is, on my computer screen, lit by the fire of electronics, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, every chapter and verse in large print. I can highlight the parts I want print, push a key and my printer delivers it in a matter of seconds.

"In our own language we hear them speaking of God's deeds of power."

Praise to you, Lord Christ.

Amen