



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

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The Feast of Pentecost, commonly called Whitsun, June 12th, 2011

**✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN. ✠**

Today we are celebrating the radical transformation that overcame Jesus' disciples 10 days after he ascended into heaven. For more than three years they had stubbornly cherished the delusion that he was planning to launch a insurrection to drive out the Romans. In fact, just seconds before he soared heavenwards, they asked: "Are you going to start the revolution now?"

Then, 10 days later, they finally grasped that the salvation Jesus offers is a heavenly one – God's forgiveness and life everlasting. And St. Peter, the vacillating blowhard, suddenly found himself urging crowds in Jerusalem: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

The transformation took the disciples as much by surprise as those to whom they were preaching. They had been fearfully awaiting the "comforter" Jesus had promised. But when it arrived, they were utterly astonished. Instead of

warm and fuzzy feelings of consolation, they found themselves exploding with joy, enthusiasm and spiritual power far beyond their imagining.

Along with the mighty rushing wind and dancing tongues of flame came the gift of tongues – not mere gobbledigook but genuine languages: Greek, Latin, Persian, Slavonic, Arabic, Coptic, Syriac, Hindu, Armenian.

The Jews of the Diaspora, who were visiting holy city from all over the known world to celebrate Pentecost, marveled at the fact that the disciples were preaching to them in the languages of their own native provinces.

The gift of tongues was perfectly timed. (Of course, you'd expect nothing less from God.) The Feast of Pentecost was the Jewish people's most ancient festival – the thanksgiving for the first fruits of the Earth. For Christians, the Feast of Pentecost echoes its ancient origins, but with a far deeper meaning because it is our thanksgiving for the first fruits of the

Holy Spirit – the start of the Church’s great evangelical adventure.

The gift of tongues was not a mere display of divine one-ups-manship – a miraculous sign from Christ to his faithful followers. It was practical gift that was to be a vital tool for spreading the Gospel throughout the world.

The foreign Jews in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost were much like their counterparts today. For most of them, their mother tongue was the language of their country of their birth. St. Paul, for example, hailed from Tarsus and his first language was Greek, as his eloquent epistles attest.

Few of them were fluent in Hebrew, the liturgical language of Jerusalem. The huge Jewish community in Alexandria had for 200 years been using the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Jewish Bible, rather than Hebrew.

Most people, Jew and gentile would probably have spoken some Greek – the language of the Gospels and the *lingua franca* of the Roman Empire – but preaching in anything other than their mother tongues would have been hard going. It is hard to get new and alien concepts across in a foreign language.

Scripture gives the lie to the notion that Pentecost was simply a display of mass hysteria: that, far from speaking tongues, the disciples were merely babbling gibberish that. Luke – a meticulous observer – lists in the Book of Acts the languages that were being spoken.

Moreover, Luke and Paul make it clear that they and their colleagues made

frequent use of the gift of tongues during their evangelical journeys. The Book of Acts and the Epistles make it clear that the church came to regard the gift of tongues as necessary tool for spreading the Gospel.

It seems to have been largely responsible for the extraordinarily rapid spread of Christianity during the First Century. Within 10 years of the Resurrection, the Gospel had reached most of the known world, including Persia, India and even the British Isles.

By AD 60, the Church was thriving. The sacraments, doctrines and liturgy were fully established as was the Episcopate, Priesthood and Diaconate. It is an achievement that would have been impossible without the ability to speak local languages and dialects..

Islam, for example, in its own violent way, is as evangelical as Christianity, yet a century after Mohammed’s death, it was still confined to a relatively small part of North Africa. Lacking God’s blessing and the gift of tongues, the Muslims adopted the sword as their primary evangelistic tool.

The gift of tongues is still at work in the Church today as missionaries and Bible translators freely attest. But the gift is given to serve God’s purpose, not man’s. St. Francis of Assisi famously said: “Preach the Gospel always. Use words if you have to.” If you need a foreign language to fulfill that obligation, you can be sure God will give it to you – though you might have to work just a tad harder at it than the disciples 2000 years ago. *AMEN*.