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Voices Loud and Clear: What does this mean?
A Reflection on Acts 2:1-13
(Paul Bendor-Samuel)

Over the past few days, as we have enjoyed the shared learning, fellowship, and phenomenal hospitality of City Harvest Church, many of us whose daily environment is the academy have been asking, “What does this mean?” What does it mean when the local church becomes the space for theological education and reflection? What might God be doing among us? Since it is impossible to imagine a global Pentecostal summit without reflection on Acts 2, this devotional serves as an invitation to reflect on a passage in which the startled participants end with the same question, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:13).

At the dawn of Pentecost, we find the gathered community of disciples, family, and friends of Jesus, around 120, unsure of who they were and of what they were to do. As they watched Jesus ascend, the angels told them Jesus was going to return, but *when*? They had been told to wait in the city and keep the appointment at which they would be “clothed with power from on high” (Lk. 24:49). What could this mean? The disciples found themselves in a liminal space. As in a doorway moving between rooms, they were in transition from one experience of reality to another. This liminal space was a time of waiting. The three years of Jesus’ presence had ended, and they stood on the threshold of something new, but what that was they knew not.

We live in a moment of history characterised by change, uncertainty, and instability. It has been described as a VUCA world – volatile, uncertain, complex, and filled with ambiguity. We are so familiar with these changes that we hardly need to rehearse the list of processes and global issues: shifts in global power, the devastating impacts of climate change, unsustainable economic models, unprecedented mobility and migration, the reawakening of fierce nationalisms frequently combined with religious radicalism, unimaginable developments in the field of

Artificial Intelligence, and so on. We know that much of the old ways of doing things are passing, and we do not know what the future holds. We find ourselves frequently in liminal spaces.

Yet liminal spaces are not simply transitional; they can be transformational. The disciples were not fully aware yet, but with the coming of Christ, God had launched his Kingdom – one that will not pass away. So, those 120 did the single most important thing they could do: they gathered together constantly and prayed (Acts 1:14). Why? In part, they gathered simply because they were Jews, for whom prayer was a daily practice. But I suggest it was much more than that. For three intense years, they had shadowed their master, picking up his ways, being his disciples. A central feature of Jesus' life centred on seeking silence and solitude, the quiet spaces where he could be with the Father in prayer. They turned to prayer in the upper rooms where they stayed. Indeed, everything that characterised the life of the early Christian community that we see in the Book of Acts – their teaching, breaking of bread, prayer, meeting in temple and homes, fellowship, and radical generosity in which they shared all things in common – the Master had modelled all of this to them during those three years of common life on the road together.

The disciples also did a very natural thing: they tried to sort out their leadership structure, which as the Book of Acts unfolds, becomes slightly amusing as they were about to discover that Jesus, by his Spirit, was still very much their leader, and in any case, God would raise up new leaders from completely unexpected, non-Jewish places.

So, we find them together in one place, praying. In that posture of dependency, the Spirit comes. The coming is not some gentle reassurance that all will be well, of comfort and a call to persevere. That would come at other times but not this day. Today, the Spirit of the risen and ascended Jesus comes with a violent wind and flames of fire. Today is fulfilled a prophecy made

through Joel many centuries earlier, a promise of a new era when the Spirit of God comes not just on prophets and spiritual leaders but is poured out on all God's people, never to be removed. Wind and fire indicate the disruptive, powerful in-breaking of the reign of God. The ascended Christ, who now sits at the right hand of the Father and to whom is given all authority in heaven and earth, sends his Spirit on his people.

When Jesus walked the roads of Israel – the same roads currently being torn apart by hatred, violence, and indiscriminate revenge – he announced that the kingdom of God had come. God's reign of justice, peace, favour to humankind, of grace and mercy, of reconciliation and new life – in Christ the kingdom of God had come. As Lesslie Newbigin puts it, "The kingdom of God, his kingly rule, now has a human face and a human name – the name and the face of Jesus from Nazareth."¹ Jesus has ascended, and now, with the outpouring of His Spirit, the people of God have become the human face of that Kingdom. This, of course, has enormous implications for what we understand the mission of the Church to be. Put simply, the scope of the Church's mission is defined by the scope of God's mission as revealed in the life, person, and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

The outpouring of the Spirit is not only manifest in wind and fire but through the transformation of the community. Empowered by the Spirit, a new community forms characterised by boldness, authority, radical generosity within, and openness to those outside the community. The kingdom of God is made visible through those who will come to be known as Christians. This transformation is first expressed through the speaking in other tongues. The Greek word for other is *heteros*, emphasising difference. It is the word from which in English we

¹ J.E. Lesslie Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way: Bible Studies* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987): 7.

get our word *heterogeneity*, which means diversity, in comparison with homogeneity, meaning the same or similar. A homogeneous group whose common language was Aramaic suddenly found themselves speaking a whole array of languages. The text emphasises that this was not because they had learned these various languages, but they spoke them “as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:4).

Now, of all the gifts God would prioritise on the launch of his Kingdom, have you ever considered why God would choose this? Not miracles, healing, raising from the dead, the casting out of demons. Instead, the Spirit reveals the presence of the Kingdom through the gift of diverse languages. The significance of the gift becomes apparent immediately in the text (Acts 2:5-12). Jews and converts to Judaism scattered across the Roman world had gathered for the feast of *Shavout*, fifty days after Passover, to celebrate the first fruits of the wheat harvest and the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. The text lists fifteen regions across a vast area of the Roman world.

The miracle is that these Jews of diverse languages and cultures hear the wonders of God each in their own language. The significance of this is underlined by the fact that three times in the text we are told that the population is amazed to hear the good news “in their own language” (Acts 2:6, 8, 11). The text, with its statement that those gathered came “from every nation under heaven” (v. 5), is a clear reference back to Genesis 10 and 11.

Genesis 10 provides us with a table of nations. The offspring of Noah are described by their “clans, languages, territories and nations” (Gen. 10:4, 20, 31). We are given a picture of completeness of the nations, indicated by the fact that seventy are mentioned. One of the key themes of the early chapters of Genesis is the oneness of humankind. Genesis chapters 1, 2, and 5 tells us that humankind has descended from one couple, Adam and Eve, and in Genesis 10, all

nations trace their origins back to Noah and his sons. The message is clear that, in all our diversity, we are one.

The sense of wholeness and unity is shattered in Genesis 11 with the story of Babel – a story of human pride and sinful exclusivity – when the people say, “Let us make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the whole earth” (v. 4). The text introduces us to the sin of ethnocentrism and the roots of racism. If Genesis 3 shows us the effect of individual sin, the story of Babel introduces us to systemic sin. The result is the shattering of oneness under the curse of Babel, where language becomes the source of confusion, disunity, and scattering.

Now, at Pentecost, the curse of Babel is reversed, and the nature of the kingdom of God revealed. All nations come together, and in their coming together, their diversity is honoured. How much easier it might have been if the listeners had all been given the ability to understand Aramaic. In building the church, would it not have been more useful if they had all shared a common language and could understand each other? No, the oneness that the Spirit brings does not obliterate the diversity of language and culture.

When the Spirit is poured out on the whole people of God, the result is that representatives of the whole Roman world hear the good news of the Kingdom in their own languages. They feel confused by this unparalleled event and ask, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:13). What it means is that here, at the birth of the Church, a profound statement is made of huge theological, ecclesiological, and missiological significance. The unity of the Church will not be based on uniformity. You do not need to understand Aramaic to join the community. No one language is normative in the kingdom of heaven: not Latin, Greek, or English. You do not need to abandon your language and culture to join the community. In fact, you must not abandon your language and culture, as that would betray God’s intentions as revealed at Pentecost. Unity

will be built on the reality that there is no other name by which we may be saved (v. 38), and that unity in Christ will be built in diversity.

Did the apostles understand the significance of the Spirit-given ability to communicate the gospel in the native tongues of the hearers? The story of Acts suggest they did not. Peter, leader of the apostles, had to go on a long journey of personal conversion. His encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10) set him on the way, but reluctantly so. He is almost apologetic when speaking with the other Jerusalem leaders when explaining why he baptised a gentile: “So if God gave them the same gift [Holy Spirit] as he gave us, [...] who was I to think I could oppose God?” (11:17). In Acts 15, at the Council of Jerusalem, despite his personal experience and revelation from God that the Gentiles are not unclean, Peter and the other apostles have to be persuaded by Paul and Barnabas that they could be saved while retaining their culture and practices. Even then, Peter’s conversion remains incomplete. In the Book of Galatians, Paul explains how when Peter fled from Jerusalem to Antioch, he was happy to eat with Gentiles until hardliners came from James in Jerusalem, at which point he shattered the oneness of table fellowship and withdrew to eat with Jewish converts separately. Paul has to confront Peter, pointing out that such behaviour was contrary to “the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14).

This brings us to why we have gathered here in Singapore for these days. We have come to hear the diverse voices of the global Church that Pentecost embedded in the core DNA of the people of God. The long journey of conversion from the security of homogeneity to richness of heterogeneity is the journey we all must take.

What do I mean?

Put simply, most of us tend to assume that our experience, our perspective, is the normal Christian experience and perspective. Our theology and practice become normative, meaning

that our theology, experience, and practice become the standard by which others are judged. The ethnocentrism that first appeared at Babel is alive and well in most of us.

We live at a critical juncture in the growth of the Church globally. For over 200 years, the Western mission movement has been used by God to grow the Church around the world. In the past thirty to forty years, this has become a global mission movement. The churches in Singapore have contributed strongly, especially in Southeast Asia. In the process, unfortunately, the weakness of the Euro-American mission movement has also been absorbed into the newer movements. In particular, Western mission, as developed in a particular Euro-American context, with its own particular Euro-American Church history, assumed that its understanding of theology and mission was normative for all peoples in all contexts. This is evident powerfully in the kind of slogans propagated in the West, including phrases like “10/40 window”, “Unreached People Groups”, and “Finish the Task”.

While we understand that the revelation of God through the Scriptures and in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ is unchanging and normative, every attempt to understand and grasp this revelation is shaped by our context and experience. Thus, the Euro-American context and culture shaped the theology and practice that spread through the mission movement. We see the same assumptions being made in new mission movements such as Korean, Nigerian, and, dare we say it, Singaporean.

The vision of the people of God declared at Pentecost is of a global Church that reflects the face of God through all the redeemed and transformed cultures and languages that are the legacy of Babel. Now, language and culture need no longer exist as barriers that separate and result in confusion and dispersion. Instead, out of our unity in Christ, our language and cultures –

when drawn into and redeemed by the Church – can serve as the myriad facets of a diamond that sparkle with the light, grace, and truth of Christ, the true light of the world.

There is work to be done, friends. One of the significant challenges and opportunities before the Church today is how to encourage, nurture, celebrate, and learn from the many faces of Christ and his Kingdom revealed to us through the authentic discipleship of those from diverse cultures and languages. We must first embrace the particularity of our own culture, with its riches, gifts, and weaknesses. Having done this, we will be in a better position to avoid the trap of normalising our culture, theology, and practices as we go into the world in mission. A serious commitment is needed from those who hold power in the church if we are to hear “global voices loud and clear”. Much work is needed if we are to help each other demonstrate what the kingdom of God looks like in the varied contexts in which the Church finds itself, including:

- contexts of affluence and poverty;
- contexts of war, displacement, and migration;
- contexts dominated by particular religions, pluralism, or deep secularism;
- rural and urban contexts;
- contexts in which the Church has a long history and those where it is young; and
- contexts where the Church is numerous and those where it is still a tiny percent of the population.

In each place, followers of Jesus Christ, empowered by the Spirit, are called to demonstrate what the kingdom of God is like and to bear witness to God’s grace and abundant life in their own language and culture. Then, the glory and honour of the nations will be brought into the heavenly city (Rev. 21:24-27), reflecting for eternity the manifold wisdom and transforming grace of God.

The vision is clear: to see the first fruits represented by those gathered in Act 2 become the global harvest, where the glory and honour of the nations is brought into the heavenly city.

Forget the slogan, “finish the task.” We have barely begun.

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