

Session #3: Acts Chapter 2



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Introduction

With the Ascension of the Lord St. Luke turns now to tell the story of the beginnings of the Church. What we will see in Chapter two is what is called the *Pentecost Narrative*

which consists of an introduction (2:1-13), a speech given by Peter describing the resurrection of Jesus Christ and His messianic mission (2:14-36), the response of the crowd (2:37-42) and life in those first days of the Church (2:43-47). Scholars suggest that while the descent of the Holy Spirit, Peter's speech and those first converts could have all happened in the matter of one day, it is more likely happened over the course of time and with a less dramatic scale. Their reasoning is that with all of this occurring on a grand level in day, the Apostles would have drawn attention to themselves and thereby risking reprisals and imprisonment by the religious authorities. Remember it was this authority that had brought about the death of Jesus for just this same reason – possibility of amassing great crowds of followers who would then possibly be incited to revolt.

The Holy Spirit Comes at Pentecost 2:1-13

2:1 Day of Pentecost

What begins as an important feast of the Jewish community becomes the day of celebration of the birth of the Church for the Christians. For the Jews Pentecost (in Hebrew *Shavuot*) was one of three feasts (Passover, Pentecost and Booths) that every able bodied men within 20 miles of the city is legally bound to travel to Jerusalem. Pentecost celebrates the richness of God's bounty through a harvest festival, the end of the grain harvest (Leviticus 23) and later took on the added significance of the appreciation of God's Law at Sinai. We are meant to make the connection between this moment of the descent of God's Holy Spirit and the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai (Ex 19:16-18). In both we see the filling of the whole house/mountain, the fire representing God over heads/over mountain all to represent God's presence. We are also reminded of John the Baptist's words when he baptized Jesus, *with the Holy Spirit and fire* (Luke 3:16) For the Jews Pentecost happened 50 days after Passover so those traveling far may have just remained in the area and if not more had come to Jerusalem. Today, as Catholic Christians Pentecost, which is celebrated 50 days after Easter, acclaims and commemorates the birth of the Church. Pentecost is taken from the Greek *pentecostes* which means 50th.

2:2 a noise like a strong driving wind

In the Bible a *strong driving wind* often (if not always) represented the power or spirit of God in action... the Holy Spirit. (Genesis 8:1, Exodus

14:21-22, Numbers 11:31, Psalm 78:26...) So, in this moment the wind is the action of God as He enables the Apostles and disciples as the first leadership of the new formed Church.

2:3 tongues as of fire Another representation of God's presence, power or Spirit and the only time we see or read it is here in Acts. We see fire in Exodus (13) which led the Israelites by night (and the cloud by day) and understood as God's presence. But it is only here that the fire becomes an individual experience resting on each of those gathered. Today we understand these tongues of fire as confirmation, strengthening and enabling the Apostles and disciples to go forth to proclaim the gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit.

2:4 filled with the Holy Spirit Four more times we will read in Acts how God fills the Apostles with His Spirit. (Acts 4:8, 4:31, 9:17, 13:9)

The Spirit is the founding gift of the New Covenant that animates the body of the Christian community (1 Cor. 12:12-13). He directs the missionary efforts of the Church (1:8; 13:2), guides her leadership into truth (John 16:13), and sanctifies her life through the sacraments (2:38, 8:17; John 20:22-23).

Ignatius Catholic Bible Study: The Acts of the Apostles.

This moment becomes the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Ezekiel who said: *I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you* (Ezekiel 36:26)

to speak in different tongues We have all heard of "speaking in tongues", a practice which is celebrated in this moment. Speaking in tongues is defined as and understood as being given the power to speak in a language you do not know as you give praise to God. St. Paul will later go on to name this (and the interpretation of tongues) as spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). In this moment scholars suggest we understand that this gift comes to symbolize the worldwide nature of the mission of the gospel and the mission of the Church in contrast to the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) where God multiplied the languages to confuse and divide people. All peoples are meant to hear and receive the message of the mercy, love and salvation found through Jesus Christ.

Without doubt, the Holy Spirit was at work in the world before Christ was glorified. On the day of Pentecost, however, he came down on the disciples that he might remain with them forever; on that day the Church was openly displayed to the crowds and spread of the Gospel among the nations, through preaching was begun. Finally, on that day was foreshadowed the union of all people in the catholicity of the faith by means of the Church of the New Alliance, a Church which speaks every language, understands and embraces all tongues in charity, and thus overcomes the dispersion of Babel.

Vatican Council II, *Ad gentes*, 4

2:5 devout men from every nation This moment foreshadows the acceptance of the Gospel in all nations. These men, these Jews have gathered in Jerusalem, as prescribed by Jewish law, to celebrate the feast of Pentecost.

2:9 We are... The list of nations and regions given denotes that the Word of God will be heard by all nations and will travel to the ends of the world.

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2:10 proselytes These are the people who converted to Judaism. Remember, to be a Jew is not just a faith belief but it is a national heritage as well. To this day many proud Jews can trace their lineage all the way back to Abraham.

2:12 Amazed and confused Scholars suggest that St. Luke is not just stating a fact but means to allude to the story of the Tower of Babel. Language, what God once used to scatter the people now becomes the instrument used to draw individuals back into community. What further supports this idea is that the name Babel can be derived from ancient Hebrew *sygchysis* which can also translate to confusion.

2:13 They are filled with new wine No matter where one goes, no matter the period in time, there will always be those who will resist the action of God's grace. They will work hard to find excuses and reasons to justify their actions and beliefs. Interesting to note that in a study of the symbolic images of the prophets of the Old Testament, to drink "new wine" was used by the prophets of the Old Testament to symbolize the idea of celebrating in union and promise with God.

A final word about the Sacrament of Confirmation: We cannot talk about the coming of the Holy Spirit without a nod to the sacrament of Confirmation. Most of us learned, as we prepared for this sacrament that we would be receiving the gift of the spirit. Unfortunately most of us have forgotten what this means. We read in the Catechism of the Catholic Church#1303:

From this fact, Confirmation brings an increase and deepening of baptismal grace:

- *it roots us more deeply in the divine filiation which makes us cry, "Abba! Father!";*
- *it unites us more firmly to Christ;*
- *it increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us;*
- *it renders our bond with the Church more perfect;*
- *it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross:*



This same Spirit that came down upon the Apostles and early disciples lives present in our lives as the gift of Confirmation, unfortunately for most Catholics we see this sacrament as a "graduation" or a rite of passage rather than an empowering to participate in the missionary work of the Church. In baptism we were united with Christ for a purpose. In Confirmation we are given the strength and ability to do our part to bring about God's Kingdom here on earth. We become an official witness, a public witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ. As Confirmed Catholics we have an obligation to be a public witness. Unfortunately this gift, if understood as a muscle, has atrophied from lack of use for many. We get out of this gift what we are willing to seek from the gift. The more we use the more we receive God's grace.

Peter Proclaims the Living God 2:14-36

Once they have received the gift of God's Holy Spirit the Apostles and Disciples rush out to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. We will find that throughout the book of Acts St. Luke has included several speeches. Six in total – five are given by St. Peter and the sixth by St. Paul. (3:12-26, 4:8-12, 5:29-32, 10:34-43, 13:16-41). What we have here in this section the first Christian sermon coming from the lips and heart of St. Peter. In the world of preaching there are four different types:

1. Kerygma: Greek which literally translates a herald's announcement
2. Didache: Greek for teaching
3. Paraklesis: Greek translation—exhortation which is a type of preaching calling listeners to live out in their lives what God is calling them to and teaching them.
4. Homilia: Greek meaning an educated interpretation of the scriptures with practical challenges how to live them out in our lives.

The preaching offered here by St. Peter is Kerygma and quoting from Joel about the Messianic age. *Here, Peter is saying to the Jews: For generations, you have dreamed of the day of God, the day when God would break into history. Now, in Jesus, that day has come. Behind all the imagery stands the great truth that, in Jesus, God arrived in person on the scene of human history.* The New Daily Study Bible by William Barclay

It is appropriate that St. Peter should be the first to preach the gospel as the first Pope of the Church. **2:15 *third hour of the day*** By our clocks that would be 9am. It was tradition that Jewish pilgrims would fast on Pentecost morning until after they have visited the Temple. Much like many of us remembering not eating after midnight until after we got home from Mass. (Why those early Masses were so popular!) Nine am was the time of the first prayers of the Temple. The crowds would have been massive as they made their way into the Temple.

2:17-28

After Peter offers his denial of drunkenness he presents his first homily quoting from the book of Joel (2:28-32) fortified by the Prophet Isaiah (2:2). The book of Joel is one of the twelve minor prophets (Isaiah one of the five major prophets). They are called minor not because they are less important but simply because they are briefer texts. Joel was one of the earliest prophets proclaiming God's



Word in the 9th Century BC during the reign of Joash, among others. Scholars suggest that while the original text from Joel is speaking in general terms to the people of his age speaking of the saved remnant of Israel rescued from Jerusalem; St. Peter understands it to be a prophecy of his present age. In that room are young and old, slaves and free and all can know salvation from the Lord, Jesus. St. Peter, now prophet and preacher, is recognizing that the

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long-awaited end of time (not the end of all time) has begun in Jesus and will now be continued in God's Church.

2:17 the last days Scholars believe that Joel is not speaking of the end of all time but the end of the age, the end of the old Covenant before the messianic age, the beginning of the new covenant. In truth the end of the last days is overlapping with the beginning of the new or messianic age. (Hebrews 1:1-2) This expression "last days" is one shared by other prophets and Moses (Number 24:14, Isaiah 2:2, Daniel 2:28 and Hosea 3:5)

your sons and your daughters shall prophesy St. Peter continues to give new meaning to these verses of Joel. Once what was given only to the occasional king or prophet now is given to all. In this now present messianic age (which you and I are living in) the gift of prophecy is offered to all regardless of gender, economic status or age.

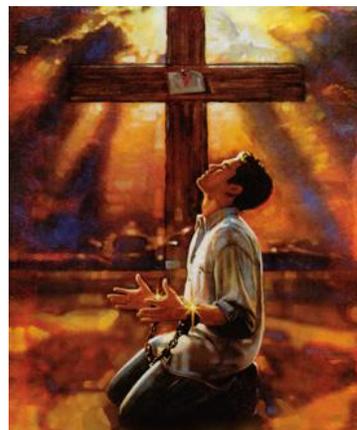
your old men will dream dreams It is a long standing tradition that God uses dreams to communicate. We have the dreams of Joseph (Genesis 37:1-11), Samuel (1 Samuel 3), Daniel (Daniel 7:1-28) in the Old Testament. In the New Testament we read of the dreams of Joseph to take Mary as his wife (Matthew 1:20-21), warning him to flee to Egypt (Matthew 2:13) and we have the visions of St. John in the book of Revelation. Dreams can be a way God communicates.

2:19 I will work wonders In St. Peter's eyes through the power of the Holy Spirit, he now understands the wondrous deeds are the work of God through Jesus

2:20 day of the Lord This term does mean a day of judgement but for Israel. Peter is stating in this speech that that day has come. Jesus has walked with them, preached and taught, performed miracles and then died and rose from the dead – all within their midst and yet they did not believe. In the coming days, years these Apostles and Disciples, through the power of the Holy Spirit would change the world. And that same spirit is among us today. Billy Graham once talked about that there is a young man or young woman today who if they gave EVERYTHING over to the Holy Spirit they would change the world. Look at now Saint Teresa of Calcutta. She has affected how the world sees the poor. We can each be that person.

2:21 who calls on the name of the Lord For Joel this was a reference to the Jews to believe in God and seek God alone in times of trouble. For St. Peter, he now understands that Jesus, as the Son of God is also Lord and that salvation, true salvation comes from belief in Jesus Christ as their Lord and savior.

2:23 the definite plan Jesus' torture and death was not a coincidence nor was it an accident. What the Jewish authorities and Roman leadership collaborated to do, to crucify Jesus was all a part of God's divine plan to bring about the salvation of the world. And that plan continues to this day with each of us playing our part, or at least we should be playing our part.



2:25 "I saw the Lord..." St. Peter is now quoting from the words of King David, Psalm 16:8-11. In Psalm 16 David is singing God's praises and praying that he might be saved from death. St. Peter is realizing (through the power of the Holy Spirit) and preaching that David's prayer has been fulfilled but only through the Messiah, Jesus. It was only Jesus whose body knew no corruption. David's body knew corruption so these words must apply to Jesus, the Messiah.

2:27 not abandon me to the realm of the dead Whenever we recite the Creed we state that Jesus *descended to the dead/hell*. The question has been asked of me why did Jesus need to go into the netherworld, into hell? To explain we must understand history or time as separated into the time before salvation and the time after. The resurrection of Christ creates a bridge or as some have explained an opportunity in that the gates of heaven which were closed with the sin of Adam and Eve are now open through the sacrifice of the Cross. Those who died in righteousness, in right relationship with God had to wait to enter in to heaven. With the resurrection the gates of heaven opened to all the righteous. Scholars explain that Jesus descended into the netherworld and hell to offer one last time the opportunity to believe and to gather the righteous unto himself.

2:29-36

2:29 and his tomb is in the midst to this day While the tomb of King David was lost for centuries (and rediscovered in the 9th Century) one can believe that those Jews of the 1st century knew exactly where David was buried, and that St. Peter in this moment is gesturing or pointing in the direction of that tomb.

2:30 sworn with an oath An oath is a promise or a pledge that cannot be broken. St. Peter is reminding all listeners (that includes you and me) that God swore an oath to King David (Psalm 89:3-4, Psalm 132:11-12) that David's lineage, his line, his throne would last forever and that oath was fulfilled in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. Jesus will reign forever on the throne of God in heaven.

2:32 of that we all are witness St. Peter is stating that they themselves are proofs to the truth of these statements because they are eye witness to the resurrection and ascension.

2:33 at the right hand of God This also could read *by the right hand of God* meaning by the power of God.

2:34 The Lord said to my Lord This is a quote from Psalm 110 (which is the most frequently cited psalm in the New Testament). Scholars understand this psalm as a vision of King David overhearing God inviting the Messiah, Jesus to sit beside him on the throne while God takes care of the enemies of heaven. St. Peter is preaching that this vision is now fulfilled through the Ascension of Jesus. It is not about David himself because David is dead and buried.

3:36 both Lord and Christ As a child I assumed that Jesus' last name was Christ just as mine is now Lisiecki and was meant to identify one as part of a larger family group. In truth Christ is Greek and means the Anointed One, the Messiah. St. Peter is stating that Jesus is both the Messiah (Christ) and the Son of God (Lord).

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The First Converts to the Faith 2:37-41

2:37 cut to the heart

As St. Peter preached those whose hearts were open to hearing the truth, they were moved to action but needed direction so they asked, *what shall we do?*

2:38 Repent and be baptized

Repentance is the truth that the prophets to St. John the Baptist preached and is now taken up by St. Peter and the Apostles. Repentance, to repent means to recognize one's own sinfulness and a desire to live differently, to live a life in union with God. Repentance is a change of heart and mind from sinful behavior which leads to a change of life seeking to live a more holy and righteous (right relationship with God) behavior. One has not truly repented if one's life does not change and continue to change throughout their lifetime. Repentance is a process. St. Peter connects repentance and baptism. One leads to the other in that baptism is an outward ritual or sign of an inward state of being, and inward desire. So, it is through Baptism that we are brought into the world of salvation. The Council of Trent stated that Baptism is *the means used by Christ to cleanse us of guilt, fill us with the grace of divine life, and adopt us as children of God.* (Session 6, Chapter 7). Baptism is a sacrament and what is a sacrament? – an encounter with Christ.

2:39 the promise is to you and to your children

For the last few centuries our experience is that baptism primarily occurs to infants with the occasional adult who usually is seeking to enter the Catholic Church because of marriage. For the first few centuries (and is beginning to happen again as families delay baptism), as the parents made the decision to come into the Christian/Catholic faith they were baptized along with all of their children regardless of their ages. (Acts 16:15, 16:33; 1 Corinthians 1:16; CCC 1252). It is also a statement that this gift of faith, of baptism is open to EVERYONE – young old, rich or poor, of all nations.

2:40 Save yourselves from this crooked generation

The words of St. Peter but could easily be said today. This expression is first found on the lips of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:5) as he speaks of the generation that was condemned to wander in the desert because of their lack of faith in God as well as of the gentile populace that the faithful must live among.

2:41 there were added that day about three thousand souls

St. Luke begins to bring an end to this section by giving testimony to those who came to belief that day. St. Luke will continue in his writing in Acts to show the effectiveness of the preaching of the Gospel by repeatedly stating that more and more were added into the fellowship of the Christian Community (2:47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1; 9:31; 11:21 and 16:5). It gives testimony that where the Gospel is preached and lived in integrity and truth hearts will open and believe.

It is not true that everyone today – in general – is closed or indifferent to what our Christian faith teaches about man's being and destiny. It is not true that men in our time are turned only toward the things of this earth and have forgotten to look up to heaven... we have to bring to solemn and unequivocal message of St. Peter in the days that followed Pentecost: Jesus is the cornerstone, the Redeemer, the hope of our lives. "For there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12

Christ is Passing By by Josemaria Escriva

As a final note it is interesting to note that those who came to faith on this day matches the numbers that were killed because of their unfaithfulness in the days of Moses. When Moses came down from the mountain and saw that the Israelites had created a golden café to worship rather than the one true God, 3,000 were killed. Exodus 32:28. Those that were destroyed in the Old Covenant are now restored in the new.

Life in the First Church 2:42-47

As we have talked about in our first session, St. Luke wrote this document in a series of expanding testimonials. As we bring our first testament to a close we have a summary passage that outlines the life of the Jerusalem community. St. Luke makes it sound almost heavenly, doesn't he? There are a total of three such summaries throughout Acts. Here in chapter two as well as 4:32-37 and 5:12-13 in these early chapters.

2:42 teaching...fellowship...breaking of bread...prayer This statement by St. Luke is the formula of the life of the early Church and should be the elements for the ongoing life of all believers.

- **Teaching:** St. Luke speaks of here the teachings of Christ and the biblical passages of the Old Testament that referred to Jesus, like those Peter used in his speech. For the early Church they would have reminded one another what Jesus taught and then looked to the Apostles for explanation and understanding. As new members were brought into the community they would have needed to learn and the old members continue to discover new meanings. Today we should never weary of seeking to learn more and more about our faith. What are the teachings of scripture? What are the teachings of the Church and why does the Church teach such?
- **Fellowship:** As was then should be now in seeing our primary support system as the one we find through our friendships and relationships through the Church. We are called the "children of God" so we should come together as family.
- **Breaking of the Bread:** Eucharist/Mass. In those early days what the Apostles provided looked more like the Last Supper but was just as real as our Mass today. Believers gathered to share in the gift of life given through the Eucharistic bread. Our participation in Mass is essential to a living faith. These early Christians would have likely repeated what Jesus did at the last supper, probably with Peter in the role of Jesus. It also means eating meals together.
- **Prayer:** This is both private, personal prayer and investment in the prayer life of the Church



community. Coming from the Jewish tradition those prayers taken from scripture would have given them the basis for the prayers of the early community as well as the Lord's Prayer which Jesus had taught them.

This verse gives us a description of the life of the early Church. They were united as one family, learning together, praying together, eating together and coming together in a

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Eucharistic liturgy.

2:43 wonders and signs were done

Later verses in the book of Acts will give testimony to the fact that the Apostles were able to heal the sick in much the same way as Jesus was able to heal. This shows a continuation from the mission and ministry of Jesus to this present day.

2:44-45 had all things in common -- sell their property and possessions

What St. Luke is describing here is not a communist philosophy. When one truly has their life in line with the teachings of Jesus and their eyes on Him there comes a recognition that the “things” once seen as important are no longer necessary. Much like a religious community today, individuals own things but are quick to share what they have and sell what they no longer need to benefit those who have little or nothing. It is a good practice to get into when cleaning to really look at something and ask do I really need this in my life? If not then why am I holding onto it?

2:46 attending the temple together

It took a few years before these early Christians understood themselves as a separate religion from the Jewish faith. Jesus was a Jew who predominately preached to Jews and in or around the Temple or Synagogues. In their minds the Temple still was God’s house. The Twelve Apostles were Jewish. It will not be until St. Paul comes on the scene that the discussion is taken up: Are we as Christians separate from Judaism or are we simple a sect within the Jewish faith? But here in these beginning days they do what they remember and know – they go to the Temple. Besides this is where the faithful gather.

breaking bread in their homes

Remember that for the first few centuries these early Christians were under persecution. The home was the place where the Eucharist was celebrated and the early Christians gathered. The first Christian Church structure was not built until the 3rd century. Recently discovered in Jordan, St. Georgeous is believed to have built the oldest proper Church in 230AD.

2:47 the Lord added

With the fervor of the newly faithful as they preached and taught each day, the Lord opened the hearts and minds of those the Apostles and disciples encountered.

Reflection Questions:

1. Whatever your belief or feeling about the gift of “tongues”, can you see how this gift, this ability helping in witnessing to the power of God?
2. Think about the “mistakes” of your life. God used the suffering and death of Jesus for the good of the world. How might He use the “mistakes” or sins for your own good?
3. What was going through your mind when you were Confirmed? How do you view that sacrament today?

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Symbols of the Holy Spirit: 694-701

Work of the Holy Spirit: 1287, 2623

Charisms or Gifts of the Holy Spirit: 799-810

Sacrament of Confirmation: 1302-1303, 1299

Jesus As a Part of God's Plan: 599-600

No Corruption to the body of Jesus: 627

Baptism: 1250-1252

Reverence for the Temple: 584

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- Agape Bible Study: Gospel of Luke by Michal Hunt. Agapebiblestudy.com
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