

## **Lord, Revive Thy Church, Beginning with Me.**

Acts 2

A sermon for Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2 has three verses with a long list of places, cities, and countries with names that are tricky to pronounce and mostly unknown to us. This is a description of people throughout the Roman Empire. Christianity was born in the Roman Empire and had the Jewish base to go on.

Sometimes on Pentecost the lectionary includes part of Genesis 11 about the Tower of Babel. What is described is that there were many who had one language, and they broke into many languages. What we have in Acts 2 is that the many languages once again became one language.

How does the Holy Spirit work? The best way to see that is in the Gospel of John. John 3:1-15 tells the story about Nicodemus. John 3:8 says: "The wind blows where it will, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." The word for Spirit and wind are the same both in Hebrew and in Greek. There is a word play going on about how the wind comes and goes. It can be quite calm one minute, then huge gusts of wind come the next. And the wind can shift unexpectedly, coming from the West, and then swirling around and coming from the East.

So it is with the Spirit. It is worth knowing as we look around the world to see how the Spirit has blown where it will. Paul was first in Asia Minor and then he was called over to Greece. In Acts 8:26-40 Phillip was reading aloud to himself, as was customary at that time, and someone from Ethiopia heard him and asked him to translate it. The implicit meaning is that this man went back to Ethiopia and Christianity spread there. Christianity spread explosively. Not only did Paul go to Rome, he intended to go to Spain (Romans 15:24).

Christianity spread throughout the known world of the Roman Empire. With the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. by Constantine 1, Christianity was tolerated. In 380 A.D. the Emperor Theodosius 1 made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. It conquered not by the sword but partly because of Roman roads and the peace that had been established by Rome.

Yet we also remember Tertullian, who had said in the Second Century: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Because of all the martyrdoms, people

said: "How do these Christians do that? What do they stand for?" They are willing to face death rather than to deny Christ. This led to the explosive growth of Christianity.

Christianity reached China already in 635 A.D., even though we think China was unknown and undiscovered. That is not true. And Christianity grew. There is a stone tablet from 781 A.D. in central China telling about the coming of Christianity and being there, about how it grew and prospered. In the Sixteenth Century St. Francis Xavier had come from the West to bring Christianity and that mission was quite successful.

When we look at our country, we see in the 1740's that Christianity exploded in what is called The First Great Awakening with Jonathan Edwards as the leader. It exploded again in 1801 in what is called The Second Great Awakening. Then Christianity grew as the country grew, not simply because of colonialism but also because of the call to bring the Gospel to the world. This sense of mission led people to go out into the world, symbolized by the World Missionary Conference in 1910 in Edinburgh, Scotland, which said we are going to bring Christ to all the world in this generation.

There was a sense that we could bring Christianity to the whole world. The Twentieth Century has been called the Century of the Church, but what people do not realize is that it was also the time of the greatest persecution of Christians. More people died for Christ in the last century than in all previous centuries combined. We are oblivious to that problem. Once again we might note as Tertullian did that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

The weight of Christianity is now in the Southern hemisphere rather than the Northern hemisphere. Take Nigeria for example. The Anglican Church of Nigeria has eighteen million members. On any given Sunday, however, there are twenty million in church. This is in striking contrast to the Church of England, which claims to have twenty-six million members, but on any given Sunday fewer than one million are in church. The Anglican Church of Nigeria is expected to double its size over the next ten years.

Christianity is growing in the Third World. In China there are now about eighty million Christians. Christianity is also exploding in terms of missionaries. Where are they coming from? South Korea. That is where the vitality is – in the Third World.

The Holy Spirit works in ways that are inexplicable, like the wind or fire which just consumes.

We also need to know that the Holy Spirit departs. You may recall that King Saul did not follow the Lord. It says in Samuel 16:14: "The Spirit of the Lord departed from him," and the Lord repented for having made him king.

In a curious way Christianity had spread across North Africa in those early centuries. Yet just at the time that Christianity was reaching China in 635 A.D., in 632 A.D. the death of Mohammad came and Islam swept across North Africa as if nothing was in its way. There was no power, no substance left of Christianity. It had grown hollow.

The same has happened now in Europe. If you ask about the heartland of Christianity, including Italy and Spain, but also in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and England the number of people in church on Sunday is about 2%. The only place that religion is seriously practiced in Europe anymore is in Albania, but they are Muslim. We see where the Spirit has departed.

The same is true in Canada and the United States. What is coming in is another spirit, the spirit of Islam. It is sweeping Europe and may sweep the whole Western world as well.

Is the Holy Spirit totally arbitrary like wind and fire? Not at all. In John 15:26 it says the same thing about the Holy Spirit as it does in John 14:26 and 16:13-14. It says the Holy Spirit has one task, that is, to re-present Christ. The Holy Spirit is not bringing something new, different, or additional. The Holy Spirit has one job and that is what the Spirit is doing.

Luther writes in his explanation to the Third Article of the Creed: "The Holy Spirit is the one who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies." The Holy Spirit is doing it, both positively and negatively throughout church history.

What then remains for us? Some of us remember the TV show in the 1960's: Mission Impossible. There was the message every time: "Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is \_\_\_\_." And then the tape with name of the mission would disintegrate in ten seconds. We are not asked "if we choose to accept it." There is only one thing left. There is only one thing to do. That task is to bring the Gospel. It is described clearly in Romans 10:14: "How are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never

heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?" And then in Romans 10:17: "Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ."

Because the Lord has taken care of sin, death, and devil and all that is important to us here in this world, there is but one task left for us, and that is to see to it that the Gospel is proclaimed to all the world, and we are to be part of that task. It is summed up in the remarkable title of a book which is also an ancient prayer, "Lord, revive thy church, beginning with me." Amen