

Speaking your language

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 October 2015

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] Thank you. So if you'd like to open your Bibles at Acts 2. Meanwhile, if you just look up onto the screen there, I've put up the part of that passage from Joel, which Peter actually doesn't quote, or at least not explicitly.

I think he does actually, but not immediately. Let me just read that out to you. This is Joel 2 verse 32. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

That's where Peter stops his quote. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls.

So keep that in your mind, perhaps. Well, as I said last week, we're going to be going through Acts and looking particularly at the work of the Holy Spirit in Acts.

As it says in that hymn that we've just sung, Spirit comes to bring unity and wisdom. And yet often, we find in practice, talking about the Holy Spirit has resulted in a lot of woolly thinking and schism.

[1:13] So we need to study carefully and think clearly about what the Spirit does and how he works. And there is much to be gleaned, I think, from this chapter, although we do have to be careful.

Some of it is actually quite puzzling when you delve into it. But in any case, there's a lot in it, and I really don't want to do much more than talk you through the chapter, but just pointing out a few things that you might not pick up on first reading and see how that relates, perhaps, to other passages of Scripture.

So, as you probably realised, it breaks down basically into three sections. First section from verses 1 to 13 describes that promise of the Spirit coming.

And then the major part of the chapter, from verse 14 through to verse 40, is Peter's address to the people. And then in the last part of the chapter, in verse 42 to 47, the new covenant community is described.

So we're going to look at all those things, and I've broken them down a bit more. I didn't quite manage to get three Ps from Peter, but if you go with explanation, proclamation and promise, it nearly works.

[2:31] But we'll look first at this promise of the coming of the Spirit and look at two things. The wind and the fire, and then this business of speaking other languages. The first thing to notice, that we need to notice from this chapter, is that they were all together in one place, and they were of one accord.

I think that's important. That's when the Spirit came, when they were all gathered together, as all the disciples gathered together in one place, and it says, of one accord, agreeing with one another. And the Spirit comes to them to establish the new covenant in the new community. I'm sure most of us have read this chapter many times before, but it didn't really occur to me, until I was studying closely for this purpose of this talk.

Have you realised how surprisingly low-key this first bit is? We're not told even that there was wind and fire. We're told, in fact, that there was just the sound of wind and something that appeared to be tongues of flame.

That's really quite strange when you think about it. And that, I think, is perhaps the first puzzle.

You'd think, at least, you would have got real wind and real fire, but apparently it's just described as the sound of wind and the appearance of fire.

[4:05] Anyway, perhaps we could ask, what do the wind and the fire signify? We can perhaps be a bit clearer about that. In Exodus 19, verse 18, I don't bother to look it up, but it describes the establishment of the Old Covenant under Moses.

And we read that the mountain where Moses was and where God appeared was shaken and that the Lord appeared in fire. Now, there must be, I think, at the establishment of the New Covenant here, some reference to that.

And yet, it doesn't even say here, the building was shaken, let alone any mountain. There was the sound of the wind and the fire. And you may be familiar with that passage in 1 Kings 19, where the prophet Elijah is fleeing from Ahab.

And he's in a state of rather depression, wanting to die. And the Lord comes to him, but, well, actually what happens first is there is a mighty wind, first of all, and an earthquake and then a fire. But actually, we're told in 1 Kings 19 that the Lord wasn't in any of those, but in the gentle voice which followed. However, I think we're to understand here that the Lord does indeed come in the wind and the fire here.

[5:37] The wind often signifies the Holy Spirit. The Greek words are related. The word for spirit is more or less the same as the word for breath, which is related to the word for wind.

And Jesus described the spirit as wind, saying it blows where it likes, and you can't always see where it's going. So the wind is clearly there to represent the spirit.

And I think we could probably say clearly that the flame is there to represent the empowering that they had been promised when the spirit came.

And we notice that it's one flame that then divides and rests on each of them, surely signifying that there is one spirit and yet each of them are individually filled with the spirit.

And this is an important thing of itself. The spirit comes to the church when gathered together and yet he also comes to each individually. And in fact, as we work through Acts, we'll see that Luke mostly uses the term filled with the spirit to refer to named individuals.

[6:47] This is one of the very few cases where he talks about them all being filled with the spirit. It's also clear that this coming of the spirit is the baptism that Jesus promised, I think, that they would be baptized in the spirit.

And again, as we go through Acts, I think it will become clear that baptism in the spirit and being filled with the spirit are actually different things. But here they happen simultaneously.

So if you're not convinced of that as yet, we'll look at that when we go further on into Acts. Here they are both baptized with the spirit and filled with the spirit.

But for now, let's just observe the result of this filling. But I would just point out that Luke, even Luke seems not entirely sure if this was a physical happening, something you could have recorded on your iPhone if you'd had it there, made a video of, put up on Facebook or YouTube.

Or was it just a vision? It may be, actually, that Luke is deliberately telling us that this, in fact, was a shared vision. The reason that might be the case is because Peter obviously later refers to seeing visions and dreaming dreams.

[8:04] So I don't think we can be entirely sure about that. But as I say, he does say it was just the sound of the wind and an appearance of flame. He may be trying to tell us that, in fact, this was a vision that they had.

But in any event, while some of that is puzzling, I think we can see at least what the wind and the fire are meant to mean. And I think the important part of this sign, and that's perhaps really why Luke almost downplays the first part of it, is this business of speaking in other languages.

And I think, again, it's important to notice that they began to speak. The disciples gathered there began to speak in other languages. It's not that the Spirit spoke through them without them understanding or anything like that.

It's clear that's not what's meant here. Somehow or other, the Spirit planted or awakened in the speech centers of their brains, as we might describe it in terms of modern psychology, planted the ability to speak these other tongues.

How he did that is not clear. It may be that some of them already had this language in their brains. They're like that man who woke up after an accident and suddenly discovered he could speak Welsh.

[9:17] But I don't know whether that's what happened. They had those languages locked in their brains or perhaps somehow the Spirit implanted the languages in their brains. but what is clear is that they had the ability to speak those languages.

And they could say what they wanted in those languages. I think that's the point. We don't know even whether that was a temporary ability or whether it lasted, whether they found for the rest of their lives they could speak those languages or not.

We don't know. But certainly at the time they are told, they are enabled to speak in a whole variety of languages. Those languages of the people who were gathered there in Jerusalem.

We are told what they did with it though. If you look forward to verse 11 what they did with that gift was to declare the wonders of God. And of course that's exactly what Peter was about to do in more detail.

It's also not entirely clear whether the miracle affected the hearers as well. Possibly verse 6 might imply that that they were enabled to somehow hear things in their own languages.

[10:26] But I don't think so. I think what is being said here is that those to whom the Spirit came were able to speak in different languages. And there were 120 of them remember. And it's likely that each person who was there in that crowd could hear one of them speaking in their language and could pick it out as one often can if you hear your language spoken in people speaking a lot of other languages you can pick out your own languages.

And I suspect that's what happened. But we are told the speakers were enabled to speak these languages. But this sign itself is rather strange.

The word is being preached in the language of the hearers and yet Luke is very careful to tell us that these people were all Jews. He's so close so keen to tell us that he tells us twice in verse 4 and again in verse 11.

So in a sense you might say well surely this speaking in other languages is unnecessary. They were Jewish converts so probably they had some knowledge of Hebrew. And almost any educated person in the Roman Empire would be able to speak Greek.

So Peter probably spoke to them in Greek when he did speak. We don't know that for sure. And yet the spirit chooses to speak to them in their own languages.

[11:56] And this is very strange in itself. If you were here this morning we had Nehemiah 13 read to us. And Nehemiah gets very upset about two things. First of all that there were people who weren't really Jews being counted as part of the assembly in Jerusalem.

And secondly that some of these people had children and their children could not speak the language of Judah. Presumably meaning Hebrew though it might have meant Aramaic but probably meaning they couldn't speak Hebrew.

But now 430 years later well you could say actually that battle was long lost. the Jews were spread all over the empire. Many of them were married to people who were not Jews.

Many of them weren't really very fluent in Hebrew. They read in fact the Old Testament scriptures in the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. Many of them certainly would not regard Hebrew or even Aramaic as their mother tongue.

Now you might think that God was going to get very upset about this and remind them as Nehemiah did but instead he elects to speak through the disciples to them in whatever they did consider their mother tongue to be and there was a long list of them there.

[13:25] From all over every nation under heaven he says perhaps exaggerating a little but certainly from every nation in the empire almost from all over the empire and many of them are listed from different parts of the empire.

This new covenant was going to be based on a different definition of Israel. There were at this time lots of Jewish sects that had grown up.

You read some of them we know of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and others are not recorded in the scriptures but history says quite a bit about like the Essenes and other groups. All of them were claiming to be the pure heirs of the covenant.

That was why there were so many different sects and groups. But now God is saying well we're going to take an entirely different definition now of the true Israel.

now it doesn't really matter whether you speak Hebrew or not. God would gather people gather the scattered people by messages speaking whatever language they were able to listen.

[14:41] But even so of course would they listen not all of them did. Because as we've seen it seems in verse 4 that the work of the spirit was firstly in the speakers rather than in the hearers they really were speaking in different languages but there is a change in the hearers also and that's clear from verse 6.

Some were enabled to hear they heard them speaking in their own language but they were enabled to hear but others as we read in verse 13 weren't really able to hear at all.

They just all they could hear was confusion. So what is Peter to do? Peter needs to explain. So let's now think about God. So I forgot to put that slide up.

But they were declaring the wonders of God and gathering the exiles in their own languages. So now let's look at Peter's explanation of this. And as you can see Peter refers these events to a prophecy of Joel.

Actually if you look at this prophecy of Joel not just what's quoted here but the whole thing you'll find it's really a rather odd and puzzling choice once again. Because Joel is a prophecy which is largely about the future security and the prosperity of Zion of Jerusalem.

[16:05] And yet Peter is standing up in a time when Jerusalem was under Roman occupation. He already heard a prophecy from the Lord himself that a few years later it was going to be completely destroyed.

Peter himself is going to say later it faces a coming judgment. So it's quite an odd choice of Peter's really and yet he does say that this is the fulfillment of the prophecy of a restored Judah that Joel had prophesied.

So let's look at what he actually says. First of all he says these are the last days. These must be the days of the new covenant in which Jeremiah spoke.

In which Jeremiah spoke on chapter 31 and 31 marked by each of them knowing the Lord. It's marked by the presence of the Spirit amongst all the people.

And in this sense under the new covenant all of God's servants are prophets. Which of course is exactly what Joel says here. There will be terrible times to come it says in verse 18 and 19 but those who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.

[17:20] And then surprisingly Peter actually stops before the end of the passage. Remember I put up at the beginning the rest of that passage. Joel concludes with a promise of deliverance on Mount Zion and salvation to those who God's calls from amongst the scattered survivors.

So the quotation is effectively completed I would suggest to in verse 39 where he says the promise is to you and to your children. This appears to be completing the promise that Joel made of salvation.

But before Peter can get to that he's got a lot more to say. Now we remember that from last week perhaps that as Jeremiah had prophesied a new kind of covenant so Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 5 1 to 11 had prophesied a new kind of king.

A new king on whom the spirit rests. And so Peter needs to persuade his listeners that Jesus is indeed that king. And the context he uses is again an Old Testament promise of a king in the line of David in verse 30.

And the events can only be understood by reference to that promise that there would be a king on the line of David. Jesus performed signs Peter reminds them that accredited his kingship.

[18:46] And these were not done in secret. They were well known so that presumably even these visitors to Jerusalem had heard of them. And yet they'd handed over their king to the Romans.

An act which even their Roman overlords had been a bit puzzled by at the time. Surely it's all gone catastrophically wrong. But no, says Peter, verses 23 and 24, this is exactly what God had planned

all along.

How do we know that? Because as prophesied by David, the king would not be abandoned to the grave. So there is still hope. And moreover, the prophecy was that he would be raised in power. At least that is what Peter claims in verses 34 and 35. And so Peter says that the resurrection puts the matter beyond any reasonable doubt. It is Jesus who is the promised and the anointed king. So the centre of Peter's message is the spirit in power testimony of the disciples themselves. and he does indeed refer to the Old Testament prophecies.

[20:09] But he also gives the testimony, appeals to the testimony of the disciples themselves in verse 32. He says, we are all witnesses of this. We've seen it. And wasn't that exactly what Jesus had promised when they received power?

They would be enabled through the Holy Spirit to be witnesses. witnesses. It's not some appeal to some mystical experience or some ritual carried out in secret. Their witness is a simple recounting of the facts of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

And linked to that witness, there is a visible manifestation of the spirit. We see that in verse 33. But it's not by some further miracle. Rather, it's by the fulfilment of the promise that Jesus had given them.

The result is exactly as Jesus had promised. They're convicted of their own sin, in verse 23, of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, in verses 36 and 37, and of the coming judgment.

Sorry, my iPad is nearly flat. I'm going to have to plug it in. Sorry. should be all right plugged into here, I think.

[21:33] And he's on most of the day, and the battery is nearly flat. Sorry about that. So the result of Peter's witness, of the disciples' witness, is exactly what Jesus had promised.

They were convicted of sin and of righteousness, the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and of the judgment to come. And then finally we have the Peter's promise.

And I think in verses 38 and 39 he is returning in fact to the prophecy of Joel, because deliverance is indeed being declared on Mount Zion. They need to repent and demonstrate that repentance by baptism in the name of Jesus.

And then Joel's prophecy of the Spirit poured out indeed comes into play. Note crucially verse 38. What do they have to do to receive that Spirit?

They have to repent and have their sins forgiven. There's no extra stage to go through. On the contrary, as Joel makes clear, God pours out the Spirit on all his new covenant people.

[22:43] Great or small, rich or poor, young or old, male or female. Indeed, this is what marks the new covenant people, those who can say in their hearts that they know the Lord, those who submit to the Spirit-filled King.

There is a qualification though. The promise is to you and your children and to all who are far off. There's a free appeal in verse 40. Everyone is invited, but there is a qualification.

The promise is to everyone God calls. God freely invites them in a language they can understand, but as we saw in verse 13, not only of them will hear, only those who the Lord calls by his Spirit, only those as Jesus said, who are born again of the Spirit can see the kingdom of heaven.

So, as Peter's witness comes to an end, he offers them this promise. If they repent and are baptized in the name of Jesus, then they will receive the Holy Spirit.

They do repent and baptize in the name of Jesus, so since, although Luke doesn't say so explicitly, we must assume that they received that promise, the Spirit was given to them, and as those extra ones we add on later on to the church there at the end of the chapter, they must have received the Spirit as well.

[24:17] And in case you have any doubt of that, we will see later on in Acts that in cases where there was some doubt, and there are one or two, where the people had received the Holy Spirit, the apostles were very careful to sort it out, and Luke was very careful to record it.

Here, it follows immediately from the promise, so there can be no doubt. When they repented and believed, they must have received the Holy Spirit as Joel had promised, as Peter had promised.

And so, in these last few verses, we meet this description of the Spirit-filled community. It's a bit of a disappointment, isn't it?

Where are the dreams and the visions? Where are the signs in the heaven above and on the earth beneath? there were some signs done, Luke tells us, but only by the apostles, not by all of them, and yet, Joel had said the Spirit will be poured out on all of them.

How can we make sense of this? Joel got it wrong, do you think? Well, I'm sure not. In fact, there are some, to be fair, there are some dreams and visions that we come across in Acts, they're not totally missing, but they're not the important feature that Luke wants us to point to here about the new covenant people.

[25:47] I suggest the reason is actually that, of course, in the Old Testament, these dreams and visions were the way in which the prophets perhaps gained their knowledge of the Lord's will and the Lord's word.

Sometimes the prophets, certainly in the older books, were actually called seers rather than prophets. They were the ones who saw what the word of the Lord was. Now, of course, in the new covenant, in the gospel age, in the last days, the Spirit certainly wants his people to declare clearly, thus says the Lord, but the primary message is to witness, to testify to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So in one sense, they don't need a vision to do that. They need to see what they've seen for themselves. It's not a vision. And Peter was not declaring a vision. He was saying, I've seen this in the flesh.

And perhaps that's why Joel is saying that in the new covenant, all will be prophets in the sense that they will all speak the word of God. And perhaps he described it in terms of visions and dreams, because that's the way the new prophets in the Old Testament were often seen.

May not entirely remove all doubt and confusion over this, I guess. There are some, to be fair, there are some dreams and visions in Acts.

[27:14] But this is not what Luke wants to focus on here. He wants to show us some different marks of that New Testament, that new covenant community. And in fact, I think there are three parts to what he describes for us here.

First of all, he lists what are the marks, I could say, of any spirit baptised people. But it's the same thing, really, as saying what are the marks of any church of Jesus Christ.

What are the things the church cannot really exist without? And he lists the four that probably most of us would list if we, you know, sort of sat down and made a list.

What does he say? He says there's teaching, as we're doing now, we're studying God's word, there's fellowship, sharing together, doing things together, being of one accord when we do things, rather than sort of being in competition with each other, the breaking of bread, the communion, as we'll be celebrating afterwards, after we've finished here, and prayer.

those are the routines, if you like, the spiritual routines of a gospel church. Perhaps they don't sound very spectacular in some ways, but that's the first thing Luke says.

[28:43] These are the marks of a gospel church, of a spirit-filled church, teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. Don't despise them because they're familiar.

These are things that are evidence of the spirit at work in the church. And the second thing he says that they did, was they reported on and recognised the work of God.

It's right to observe what God is doing, and he says what their response was as well. They were filled with awe. We should, when we look on the works of God, awe is the appropriate response. we may no longer have apostolic miracles, and we may argue whether we still have apostles, and whether we still have miracles, or whatever, but there aren't that many of them anyway, even if you do believe we still have apostles.

We no longer have the apostolic miracles, but God is doing greater things than that through his church. I always think one of the great evidences that the church of Jesus Christ is a divine institution, that the spirit is indeed at work, is just to look at the incompetent men and women who have been running it for the last 2,000 years, and you think, well really, not perhaps who I or you might have chosen sometimes, in some cases.

[30:17] Some had more gifts than others. All of them were fallible. None were perfect. They had blind spots, things they did wrong.

Sometimes they're too easily made angry, or sometimes they weren't easily enough made angry. All of them were fallible men and women for 2,000 years, and yet the church of Jesus Christ is still here.

That is only possible, I would suggest to you, because the Holy Spirit is at work. The church is always being reformed and revived by the work of the Holy Spirit.

The old covenant, as we've been studying with Phil over the last few weeks, slipped into decline. There was a brief golden age, if you want to call it that, but then even in that golden age, the seeds of decline were already there, and after that it was pretty much all downhill. downhill. But the church of Jesus Christ has had its downs, certainly, but the Spirit has always come and brought revival and renewal.

[31:31] The new covenant community is continually reformed by the Spirit. As the reformers said, it's not that we're reformed once, if we use the term reformed, and that's it.

We are always reformed, we're always being reformed, being made anew by the Spirit of God. And we could look at other examples, for instance, I would suggest the unexpected and almost unexplainable spread of the gospel in China, for example.

Isn't that a work of God that's worthy of awe? None of us expected it, I'm sure some people may have prayed for it, I'm sure Hudson Taylor as he stood on the beach here, prayed for it, but whether he expected the results that we've seen, what is it, 150 years later, something like that, is amazing, isn't it?

That's surely a work of God that's worthy of awe, yet one might not call it a miracle in the sort of technical sense of the word, yet it is a miracle of grace, a miracle of the Holy Spirit at work in the world.

So that's the second thing that Luke wants to tell us about, we should report on and recognise the work that God is doing and indeed we should be in awe of it.

[32:54] And then thirdly he talks to us about what are the shared values of this new covenant community. We're going to spend long on this but it's worth noting them. what are they?

Well, dealing with physical needs and poverty for instance among the brothers. And we notice this isn't by some sort of communistic legislation, you know, I'm taking it from you and holding it for the common purse, that's not the way it worked at all as we'll go on actually as we'll see in the next couple of chapters, it's not the way it worked.

But there was a fellow feeling, a family feeling the feeling that if one suffered, all suffered. And if that suffering was because they didn't have enough money to buy food or shelter, then that would be provided for them.

And they wanted to meet together. It wasn't just they had a sort of checklist or a bit of the teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayer.

They wanted to meet together. That was, you know, they were delighted to be able to meet together. Presumably they were upset when their other duties forced them to go and attend to their business or whatever.

[34:15] They wanted to be with the people of God because that was their family as it were. And that was where they could see that God was at work and where the Holy Spirit was especially amongst them. So they had that shared family feeling.

And they did it publicly and I think it also suggests they also did it privately when they weren't perhaps assembled. It's not entirely clear that.

But what they did was to praise God. And what's more, those things were done in public. Did you notice that? They actually did a lot of it in the temple. Couldn't really get more public than that in Jerusalem.

those values were not held as it were under a bowl. They were displayed for all to see. Not that people would see, look how great people we are, but rather that the grace of God, the work of the Spirit amongst them, should be visible to all.

So I think Luke is saying this to us. Do we want to see the Holy Spirit at work in our church as we gather together? Well, you can look for dreams and visions if you want, but that's not the thing that Luke suggests we focus on.

[35:32] He suggests we focus on being the people of God together in, as I said, teaching, fellowship, breaking a prayer, recognizing the work of God and those family values that we have that when one suffers, all suffer.

So in a few minutes we'll do one of those things. We've just finished doing one of them, teaching. We'll break bread and I expect Chris will give us an opportunity to pray as well.

And in a sense we're actually having fellowship as well together, even when people are sort of moving the chairs and got the chairs out beforehand and people now are going to get the communion stuff out.

That is actually fellowship. We're doing family things together. But before we do that, let's close this part of our meeting with a hymn, which is a hymn for thanking God for the gift of God the Holy Spirit.