

The Day of Pentecost

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Recently I've been reading a book by an English mythographer (a collector and teacher of myths) named Martin Shaw. And the seventh chapter, "On Prayer," begins like this:

"I once knew an assassin. He was a student of mine." Yeah, that caught my attention too. So many questions. But Martin Shaw leaves them all unanswered and continues, "He'd gone on to, as they say, do 'other things,' but his earlier job stayed with him. He seemed concerned about his past actions and wanted to start the process of at least talking about it—even if he was not quite able to immediately atone for it. His own family had abandoned him. Knowing this was outside my experience, I asked him if he'd prayed about it. He told me prayer didn't feel real to him. I asked him what did."

"Money,' [is what he said].

"So, I suggested he rip up a fifty-pound note every time he made a prayer, so soon it may feel significant."

Somehow this technique was never mentioned in any of the pastoral counseling classes or spiritual direction sessions I participated in during seminary. It was reported in the book as though Martin Shaw was out of his depth and the strange notion blew through him, unbidden, like that wind on the Day of Pentecost.

Martin Shaw makes clear that this act wasn't one of "God-bribery." He doesn't suggest it was meant to change the assassin's relationship with money either. There's no judgment about what it is that the man found most real. Tearing up some legal tender simply, as Dr. Shaw put it, "freighted the encounter with more consequence than usual."

Before long the path the two men were walking was littered with shredded pound notes. The man hoping to pray his way into a dark, dark past sat down beside a river and got very quiet. Later that night, just before midnight, the assassin's long estranged mother called him out of the blue for the first time in many years of distant silence.

I wonder what might freight your prayers with more consequence than usual? I wonder what might do such a thing to mine?

I almost didn't tell you the bit about the man's mother calling. Because I think a functional view of prayer can be what keeps me from entering the realm of the really real at times. Not only functional in the sense that if I pray just right God will give me what I ask for, but functional in a personal wellness sense too. Better prayer might mean the furious hamsters of rumination in my head will step off of their little wheels for a few breaths.

I'm not opposed to praying for specific outcomes or praying to calm one's mind. Not at all. Both can be valid and valuable acts of prayer. But on this day of Pentecost, I'm drawn to the useless power of an encounter with God's Holy Spirit. One that, as far as we can tell, nobody arranged for or expected. No one destroyed a meaningful number of denarii. But some of the people in Jerusalem that day were awake enough to receive this spirit when it filled the house and then spilled into the streets. Open enough not to simply sneer that the fools around them must be filled with new wine. Open enough to let it open them to the real.

Every year, seven weeks after Easter Day, we read this story in church. And it never gets less weird to me. Even by biblical standards for weirdness. Luke Timothy Johnson, the great scholar of Luke, points out that wind is not actually what fills the house but noise. A sound like the rush of a violent wind. Then there are those tongues, divided, or maybe individual tongues resting on the heads of the disciples like flames of fire. Given that description, do you have any idea at all what this event might have looked and sounded like? I don't.

Pentecost lives on in different ways in various Christian traditions. A mitre, you may know, is a tasteful representation of a tongue of fire in the form of a hat on the head of a bishop. It may not surprise you that we Episcopalians like our references to the unruliness of Acts chapter two rendered in fine nubby silk and colors coordinated with the liturgical seasons. Although, when our son Alden was about four, he saw a bishop processing in full regalia for the first time. He leaned over and whispered, "Mom, the bishop's hat looks like a pirate hat!" Kids intuit something wilder at work, whether they know the miter's origin story or not.

Years earlier I'd gone home with a friend from college for the weekend and visited the Pentecostal church his parents attended. It met in a high school gym. A pleasant and unassuming man named James led the music, and my friend's mother suggested/declared that I accompany him on guitar. I'll pause the story just to note that an experience akin to tearing a fifty-dollar bill in half for Kristin Lensch would be inviting Scott to lead worship at Calvary on his guitar. I assure you it would be for Scott too. But this was a different liturgical context, and a different phase in my life. Plus, I wanted to be a good houseguest. We settled on "Be Thou My Vision" as a hymn we both loved and one that didn't have too many chords. I had been picking along well enough for several verses, and then James began singing in an ecstatic tongue. I'd never heard such a thing. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit did not suggest any changes in the chord progression, so I just kept my head down and strummed on, while Brother James sang in a language that neither of us knew.

It's an amusing memory, at least to me. But truth be told, nothing about it felt forced or false. James wasn't some egomaniacal evangelist, whipping up a crowd so there'd be a bigger take when the plate got passed. He struck me, even then, terrified as I was, as genuine and sincere, and to this day I have no more reason to doubt he

was in touch with the divine energy that rocked Jerusalem at Pentecost than that a bishop's ministry is. In a word, it felt real.

What's felt real to you in your life? Really real. Maybe in spite of what you thought you believed or expected? It might have been when the hands of a mitred bishop rested on your head. Or an encounter with a work of art. Or an act of unnecessary kindness. Or that time your life savings went up in smoke. When have you realized what's really real to you? Can you imagine prayer coming from that place? Or maybe just a prayer that's freighted with more consequence than usual because you've acknowledged something you truly believe to be real?

Well, this sermon is long on stories and short on exegesis. But something in the story of Pentecost seems to invite exploding the possibilities of what an encounter with God's spirit might be like. What I may be imposing on it is the notion such an encounter will always resonate with what is most real to us. Or maybe it's truer to say such an experience will cut through all the stand-ins for the real and expose the truth about us in all its unedited strangeness.

A particular feature of the story I will lift up is this. Pentecost is called the birthday of the Church. Which makes it a feast on which we might also mourn how splintered and at odds Jesus's followers have become over the centuries. But the miraculous oneness the community experienced that day in Jerusalem was not a brief return to that mythic time before Babel when all the world spoke a single language. The languages remain diverse. The gift of the Holy Spirit was the gift of understanding. The first Christians, who were devout Jews from every nation under heaven, according to the text, retained all their strange words and presumably their strange ways. The gift was that the disciples and then the whole gathered crowd could hear each other, comprehend each other, celebrate the transforming power of Jesus's resurrection together, which was alive and well in their midst even though his body no longer was.

God knows our world could use another indwelling by a divine spirit like that one.

In a few minutes we will pray that that Holy Spirit fill a boy named Henry at his baptism. As his Christian community, a question we may wrestle with is how we stay open to what God makes really real to Henry, and perhaps, through his life, makes really real to us for the first time. Who do we need to be to help Henry let the Holy Spirit form him into the person he was created to be, not the person we think he ought to be or need him to be? There's not a tidy answer to that question any more than there's a tidy resolution to Pentecost. The Church that got born that day has been an unruly mess from the beginning. Read Paul's letters if you don't believe me. So maybe it's more helpful to think more in terms of a posture we might assume rather than a list of rules to obey. A few of Eliot's lines from "Little Gidding" might suggest a place to start.

"...Put off/ Sense and notion./ You are not here to verify,/ Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity/ Or carry report. You are here to kneel/ Where prayer has been valid." Maybe the thing Henry needs from us, to leave room for the Spirit to move in his life, is

the same thing each one of us needs. Not our verification or our instruction or our objective reports of what's supposed to happen in a church. But simply to kneel ourselves in this place where prayer has been valid. To kneel in this old room where the prayers of so many people, most of them strangers to us, have been real. And then let the Holy Spirit of Pentecost fill us, too, in whatever strange and wonderful ways she will.