

## "What Does This Mean?"

Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21

May 23, 2010

When Martin Luther wrote a small pamphlet entitled "The Small Catechism", after each section or topic Martin Luther wrote the question, "What does this mean?" When studying The 10 Commandments, The Lord's Prayer, the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, he wanted people to see that what we believe does connect with where we live. To do this, after each part he asks, "What does this mean?" It was important to make sense of the doctrines of faith. It was important to make a connection to what God teaches and what we experience in daily life.

When I was in seminary, one of my favorite teachers asked the same question. He taught, that we should make sense of what the Bible teaches. He believed it was important to see the connection between God's Word and daily life. If we do not make the connection, if it does not make sense to our lives, then the information is just useless trivia, not helpful in any way. I see the same question being asked here in our lesson for today.

If a story about people from all over the world were able to hear the gospel story in their respective foreign language, try imagining a church full of prophets. Not only did the disciples speak and everyone hear in their own native language, but they were also given the gift of prophecy. This was an incredible moment in the life of the church.

Peter begins by retrieving Joel's message from ancient times and makes a few alterations so it will be appropriate for the current occasion. He is not correcting or misquoting Joel as much as he is adapting the prophet's words for use in a new circumstance. Joel's original testimony about God has accumulated new meaning in light of God's deeds through Jesus Christ and his sending of the Spirit. In other words, Joel offers a resource by which Peter can answer his audience's question, "What does this mean?" This is something that the church has sought to do throughout history and it is something we need to continue to do – adapt God's Word for use in a world of changing, and sometimes new, circumstances.

Peter does not quote the prophet's message exactly. He subtly reshapes it to make it more fitting to the current occasion. Peter makes three significant changes.

First, he changes the opening clause from "After these things" to "In the last days." Peter sees himself announcing that the times have changed. □ Peter was aware how circumstances had changed and he correctly interpreted the Scripture to address the changes that confronted him. Sometimes the church today is slow to learn this lesson. We all too often try to place our circumstances, all of our new information into the worldview of ancient Israel. If Peter teaches anything is to adapt the Word to face and meet the times we are in now!

Next, Peter inserts the word "my" before "slaves." While Joel referred to "slaves" as an explicit class in his culture, Peter broadens the identification of this group. Now they become, not a social class but *God's slaves*. □

Slaves most likely would be more accurately translated servants. The word is the same for both in Greek. Peter is now reminding all believers that in virtue of our calling we are servants of God furthering God's will in our world.

And finally, he adds an additional "*and they shall prophesy*". Peter emphasizes why God's Spirit is bestowed on "all flesh," given to young and old, to women and men. It is given so that they will prophesy. The gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts is a gift of prophecy.

Peter does not speak of prophecy as predicting the future. Instead, prophecy is truth telling. It is naming the places and ways where God intervenes in the world. It is a component of proclaiming the word of God and identifying God's salvation at work. In other words it answers the question "What does this mean?" □

Corresponding with the three revisions the message allows Peter to accomplish three things. First, Peter interprets the times. He helps them to understand what Pentecost means. The gift of God's Spirit indicates that something new in human history has begun and that the times have changed. A large role of the church today, you and me, is to interpret the times we live in, to make sense of it by and through the use of the Bible.

Next, Peter is able to interpret the community created by the Spirit. Again Peter helps them to understand what Pentecost means. The Spirit has come to mark the church, every member, as belonging to God and as God's agent in the world. They are God's slaves (servants). The same holds true for us today. We too have been marked with Christ, we have received the Holy Spirit, and as Peter says, we have become God's agents in the world, slaves if you will, furthering that will in the places we find ourselves.

Last, Peter is able to interpret the work of the Spirit-filled community. So Pentecost means that God is at work here, equipping people to communicate about God. The Spirit prompts them to engage in prophecy that makes the community of faith a community of prophets, a community of truth-tellers.

If we are a community of faith, and we are, then it stands to reason that we too are a community of prophets? Before I get much further I believe we need to make sure we are all on the same page when it comes to what prophecy means and how we are prophets.

Peter is at pains to show that the events of the day point beyond themselves to reveal that Jesus is Lord and Messiah, and that God's salvation is at hand. This is what prophets do; they show how events connect to God and God's purpose. Peter makes sense of the crowd's experience. He offers a theological basis for what the crowd is experiencing.

This is what the church does. This is what we are called to do. We are to make sense of what is happening in our lives from what God has revealed in Scripture. It nudges us, we who have been gifted with the Holy Spirit to make sense of our time, to look at the Biblical story and help others to answer, "what does this mean?"

Amen