

## **Father Michael on Pentecost Sunday, June 15<sup>th</sup> 2008**

The importance of Pentecost needs to be emphasised – ‘The monk of the Eastern Church’, Lev Gilet, equates it with Pascha. It is noteworthy that Pentecost is followed by a Fast-free week, as Pascha is followed by Bright week.

Pentecost was: 1. A HEAVENLY MOMENT. Power was promised ‘from on high’ by Christ. (‘Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’ Acts 1 v 4) – the Church Fathers saw Pentecost as the reversal of Babel where men in their pride attempted to reach heaven by their own efforts – by building a tower. God’s judgment came in the form of confusing the language. But at Pentecost the crowd heard the apostles worship ‘each in our own language’. It was then followed by Peter’s sermon in the language they all had in common and spoke every day. Unfortunately in the Middle Ages a ‘ladder theology’ sprang up – another version of attempting to reach heaven, each ‘under his own steam’. Martin Luther responded by saying: ‘Yes, there is a ladder, but it is not from earth to heaven – this ladder comes down from heaven to earth.’ The blessings come down from heaven to earth, they are not ‘worked up’ by us.

2. Pentecost was a WORSHIP MOMENT. Actually after the Ascension of our Lord the Disciples were ‘continually in the Temple praising God.’ They were joined together constantly in prayer with the women, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. There was then an interlude during which a new apostle was chosen. – (We know those choosing our new bishop will not choose the same method!) – And then came Pentecost itself; the Holy Spirit came at 9 am. They were sitting at the time – not prostrate, or kneeling, or standing (as our Orthodox folk do). There were no strangers there or visitors – the whole church was there, not just the twelve, as in the familiar icon of Pentecost. They all received the gift of praying with the spirit or ‘speaking in tongues’. This is a gift primarily to assist our worship. The Holy Spirit gives us words to speak to God in praise or prayer, while our mind does not have to think up words. Words are often inadequate, especially to express that love of which our hearts are capable, for God. But this is true also of our prayer. We often do not know how or what to pray. After praying in English I often resort to praying with my spirit.

The power of worship in the Spirit, with the spirit, is illustrated by the account given by Vladimir of Kiev when it was being decided what church should be established in Russia. Many churches were sampled but ‘there was no joy in them’. But when an Orthodox Divine Liturgy was described, it was in these words: ‘We know not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendour or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you; only this we know, that God dwelt there among humans, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. We cannot forget that beauty.’

The gift of prayer with the spirit – not ‘in the Spirit,’ for all prayer should be in the Spirit – is supremely a worship or prayer gift, given to communicate with God rather than with men.

At Pentecost Peter did not, when he addressed the people who had gathered, speak in tongues – he spoke in the language everyone who was there, understood. The crowd had gathered because they had, each in their own language, heard the church praising ‘the wonderful works of God’. Having gathered, they heard Peter’s sermon. – Compare the ‘Gentile Pentecost’ described in Acts chapter 10 verse 44, where, when Peter was in the middle of his sermon, the Holy Spirit came on the hearers and they prophesied and spoke in tongues. All of them were, like at Pentecost, believers, no outsiders were present, because this gift of praise/prayer with the spirit is not given for evangelism but for worshipping or praying. The New Testament makes this clear in many parts but especially in 1 Corinthians 14.

Sadly this gift was lost very soon after New Testament times, probably because it was misunderstood. Initially even in the Pentecostal movement at the start of the twentieth century, many people travelled overseas from the USA where they had received the gift, thinking they would be able to preach the gospel in Africa or wherever, by using their gift of speaking in tongues. The true understanding came and grew with the Charismatic Renewal in the mainline churches in the ‘60s and afterwards. This latter is the largest religious movement with approximately 600 million world-wide. In Europe the movement is much smaller but many other countries have huge churches: South America, Central America, West Africa, Thailand. Guatemala has a church of 12000 – with a heliport! Lagos, Nigeria, can gather two million for any event or to answer a need for a demonstration. In Korea where I visited a church in Seoul, I preached to 20,000 people at one of seven services every Sunday. There are 68,000 deaconesses at this church, 34 deacons, the congregation comprises 2% of the population of Seoul. The people are divided into many cells, each with twelve people. Many languages are catered for, including Arabic. The Catholic Church is also especially strong in Korea with 15-20 million people.

3. Thirdly and lastly, Pentecost was a WITNESS MOMENT. The crowd was drawn by the Spirit-filled worship of the church and as a result of the sermon by Peter 3000 were added to the church – and, as Peter said, the same fruitfulness has resulted from the ‘times of refreshing’ occurring through the years of the history of the church ever since.