

Rev. Dr. Yugo Suzuki's Sermon

6/12/2011

Pentecost as the Beginning of the Church Acts 2: 1-13

In the earliest days of the Christian movement, the message of Jesus Christ was proclaimed only in two languages, Aramaic and Greek. For those who could not understand those two languages, the good news remained gibberish and made no sense.

But on the day of Pentecost after Jesus' ascension, this situation changed. Since Pentecost was one of the important Jewish festivals, the city of Jerusalem was full of Jewish people visiting from many foreign countries such as Turkey, Syria, Libya, even Egypt. They spoke only their own native tongues.

Then an amazing thing happened. The followers of Jesus who spoke only Aramaic and a smattering of Greek began to proclaim the Gospel in the visitors' languages, the Egyptian language, the Turkish language, the Syrian language, and the Libyan language in addition to Aramaic and Greek.

How should we understand this story?

The message it seeks to convey is clear: For the first time in their lives, this motley crowd was hearing the word of God in a way that they could understand. And what they heard struck straight home to their hearts. The Gospel of Jesus Christ can be expressed and understood by people of any language and nationality. The universality of Jesus' message - this is what the episode of Pentecost proclaims.

Toyohiko Kagawa was an outstanding Christian leader in Japan in the 1920s, 30s and 40s. Fresh out of seminary, the young Kagawa and his wife served the poverty stricken area named Shinkawa in the city of Kobe.

One evening, in his dilapidated parsonage, Kagawa was leading Bible study to a handful of converts. Suddenly the front door was torn open. And a drunken man barged in. He was the gangster named Yasu-san well known in the Shinkawa area for his excessive drinking, extortion, and gambling. Recently his wife had left him.

Yasu-san, totally drunk, shouted at Kagawa at the top of his voice. "Hey Reverend, there is no God. Love is nothing. Get out of this village. You make me sick."

One of the converts, an old woman with a bent back, took a small rice ball out of her kimono sleeve and handed it to him, "Take it, eat it. It's Jesus' rice ball." At that, Yasu-san became transfixed, took off his flip-flops, sat formally on the torn tatami mats, and bowed deeply to the old woman who had just given him her only food for the day.]

Recalling that incident, Kagawa writes, "The words of the old lady, 'Take it, eat it. It's Jesus' rice ball,' reminded me of the words of Jesus' invitation to the communion table, 'This is my body which is broken for you. Take and eat this in remembrance of me.'"

Kagawa continues. "I became convinced more than ever of the universality of Jesus' message. Jesus came to Shinkawa in the Holy Spirit, spoke to a callous, violent gangster through an old lady with a bent back, and literally changed him. The spirit of Pentecost dawned upon us."

The spirit of Pentecost dawned on Shinkawa. The same spirit may dawn upon JAUC and transform us. Would we pray for it? Or would we pretend to be indifferent? The choice is up to us. The choice is up to each one of us.

Thanks be to God.