

Homily 4 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon describes the events of Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles, empowering them to speak in tongues and preach the gospel to the world.

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Pentecost"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the significance of Pentecost, highlighting the fulfillment of the harvest and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. He emphasizes the sudden and powerful manifestation of the Spirit, symbolized by the sound from heaven and cloven tongues of fire, which rested upon each believer. Chrysostom explains the unity and boldness of the Apostles, contrasting their spiritual strength with the philosophical pursuits of others. He urges the congregation to seek the Holy Spirit's influence, overcome worldly temptations, and embrace humility and contempt for glory to receive God's blessings.

Transcript

Acts 2:1-2

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven.

Do you perceive the type? What is this Pentecost? The time when the sickle was to be put to the harvest, and the ingathering was made. See now the reality, when the time had come to put in the sickle of the word: for here, as the sickle, keen-edged, came the Spirit down. For hear the words of Christ: Lift up your eyes, He said, and look on the fields, for they are white already to harvest. John 4:35 And again, The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few. Matthew 9:38 But as the first-fruits of this harvest, He himself took [our nature], and bore it up on high. Himself first put in the sickle. Therefore also He calls the Word the Seed. When, it says, the day of Pentecost was fully come Luke 8:5, 11: that is, when at the Pentecost, while about it, in short. For it was essential that the present events likewise should take place during the feast, that those who had witnessed the crucifixion of Christ, might also behold these. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven. Acts 2:2 Why did this not come to pass without sensible tokens? For this reason. If even when the fact was such, men said, They are full of new wine, what would they not have said, had it been otherwise? And it is not merely, there came a sound, but, from heaven. And the suddenness also startled them, and brought all together to the spot. As of a rushing mighty wind: this betokens the exceeding vehemence of the Spirit. And it filled all the house: insomuch that those present both believed, and (Edd. το■τουζ) in this manner were shown to be worthy. Nor is this all; but

what is more awful still, And there appeared unto them, it says, cloven tongues like as of fire. Acts 2:3 Observe how it is always, like as; and rightly: that you may have no gross sensible notions of the Spirit. Also, as it were of a blast: therefore it was not a wind. Like as of fire. For when the Spirit was to be made known to John, then it came upon the head of Christ as in the form of a dove: but now, when a whole multitude was to be converted, it is like as of fire. And it sat upon each of them. This means, that it remained and rested upon them. For the sitting is significant of settledness and continuance.

Was it upon the twelve that it came? Not so; but upon the hundred and twenty. For Peter would not have quoted to no purpose the testimony of the prophet, saying, And it shall come to pass in the last days, says the Lord God, I will pour out of My spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Joel 2:28 And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost. Acts 2:4 For, that the effect may not be to frighten only, therefore is it both with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.

And began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. Matthew 3:11 They receive no other sign, but this first; for it was new to them, and there was no need of any other sign. And it sat upon each of them, says the writer. Observe now, how there is no longer any occasion for that person to grieve, who was not elected as was Matthias, And they were all filled, he says; not merely received the grace of the Spirit, but were filled. And began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

It would not have been said, All, the Apostles also being there present, unless the rest also were partakers. For were it not so, having above made mention of the Apostles distinctively and by name, he would not now have put them all in one with the rest. For if, where it was only to be mentioned that they were present, he makes mention of the Apostles apart, much more would he have done so in the case here supposed. Observe, how when one is continuing in prayer, when one is in charity, then it is that the Spirit draws near.

It put them in mind also of another vision: for as fire did He appear also in the bush. As the Spirit gave them utterance, ■ ποφθ■γγεσθαι Exodus 3:2 For the things spoken by them were ■ ποφθ■γματα, profound utterances. And, it says, there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men. Acts 2:5 The fact of their dwelling there was a sign of piety: that being of so many nations they should have left country, and home, and relations, and be abiding there. For, it says, There were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.

Now when this was reported abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded. Acts 2:6 Since the event had taken place in a house, of course they came together from without. The multitude was confounded: was all in commotion. They marvelled; Because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were amazed, it says, and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? Acts 2:7-13 They immediately turned their eyes towards the Apostles.

And how (it follows) hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene: mark how they run from east to west: and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God. And, they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What means this?

Others mocking said, These men are full of new wine. O the excessive folly! O the excessive malignity! Why it was not even the season for that; for it was Pentecost. For this was what made it worse: that when those were confessing -- men that were Jews, that were Romans, that were proselytes, yea perhaps that had crucified Him -- yet these, after so great signs, say, They are full of new wine!

But let us look over what has been said from the beginning. (Recapitulation.) And when the day of Pentecost, etc. It filled, he says, the house. That wind πνοή was a very pool of water. This betokened the copiousness, as the fire did the vehemence. This nowhere happened in the case of the Prophets: for to uninebriated souls such accesses are not attended with much disturbance; but when they have well drunken, then indeed it is as here, but with the Prophets it is otherwise. Ezekiel 3:3 The roll of a book is given him, and Ezekiel ate what he was about to utter. And it became in his mouth, it is said, as honey for sweetness. (And again the hand of God touches the tongue of another Prophet; but here it is the Holy Ghost Himself: Jeremiah 1:9 so equal is He in honor with the Father and the Son.) And again, on the other hand, Ezekiel calls it Lamentations, and mourning, and woe. Ezekiel 2:10 To them it might well be in the form of a book; for they still needed similitudes. Those had to deal with only one nation, and with their own people; but these with the whole world, and with men whom they never knew. Also Elisha receives the grace through the medium of a mantle 2 Kings 13; another by oil, as David 1 Samuel 16:13; and Moses by fire, as we read of him at the bush. Exodus 3:2 But in the present case it is not so; for the fire itself sat upon them. (But wherefore did the fire not appear so as to fill the house? Because they would have been terrified.) But the story shows, that it is the same here as there. For you are not to stop at this, that there appeared unto them cloven tongues, but note that they were of fire. Such a fire as this is able to kindle infinite fuel. Also, it is well said, Cloven, for they were from one root; that you may learn, that it was an operation sent from the Comforter.

But observe how those men also were first shown to be worthy, and then received the Spirit as worthy. Thus, for instance, David: what he did among the sheepfolds, the same he did after his victory and trophy; that it might be shown how simple and absolute was his faith. Again, see Moses despising royalty, and forsaking all, and after forty years taking the lead of the people Exodus 2:11; and Samuel occupied there in the temple 1 Samuel 3:3; Elisha leaving all 1 Kings 19:21; Ezekiel again, made manifest by what happened thereafter.

In this manner, you see, did these also leave all that they had. They learned also what human infirmity is, by what they suffered; they learned that it was not in vain they had done these good works. 1 Samuel 9 and 11:6 Even Saul, having first obtained witness that he was good, thereafter received the Spirit. But in the same manner as here did none of them receive. Thus Moses was the greatest of the Prophets, yet he, when others were to receive the Spirit, himself suffered diminution.

But here it is not so; but just as fire kindles as many flames as it will, so here the largeness of the Spirit was shown, in that each one received a fountain of the Spirit; as indeed He Himself had foretold, that those who believe in Him, should have a well of water springing up into everlasting life. John 4:14 And good reason that it should be so. For they did not go forth to argue with Pharaoh, but to wrestle with the devil. But the wonder is this, that when sent they made no objections; they said not, they were weak in voice, and of a slow tongue.

Exodus 4:10 For Moses had taught them better. They said not, they were too young. Jeremiah 1:6 Jeremiah had made them wise. And yet they had heard of many fearful things, and much greater than were theirs of old time; but they feared to object.-- And because they were angels of light, and ministers of

things above [Suddenly there came from heaven, etc.] To them of old, no one from heaven appears, while they as yet follow after a vocation on earth; but now that Man has gone up on high, the Spirit also descends mightily from on high.

As it were a rushing mighty wind; making it manifest by this, that nothing shall be able to withstand them, but they shall blow away all adversaries like a heap of dust. And it filled all the house. The house also was a symbol of the world. And it sat upon each of them, [etc.] and the multitude came together, and were confounded. Observe their piety; they pronounce no hasty judgment, but are perplexed: whereas those reckless ones pronounce at once, saying, These men are full of new wine.

Now it was in order that they might have it in their power, in compliance with the Law, to appear thrice in the year in the Temple, that they dwelt there, these devout men from all nations. Observe here, the writer has no intention of flattering them. For he does not say that they pronounced any opinion: but what? Now when this was reported abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded. And well they might be; for they supposed the matter was now coming to an issue against them, on account of the outrage committed against Christ.

Conscience also agitated their souls, the very blood being yet upon their hands, and every thing alarmed them. Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? For indeed this was confessed. [And how hear we] so much did the sound alarm them. [Every man in our own tongue, etc.] for it found the greater part of the world assembled there. [Parthians and Medes, etc.] This nerved the Apostles: for, what it was to speak in the Parthian tongue, they knew not but now learned from what those said.

Here is mention made of nations that were hostile to them, Cretans, Arabians, Egyptians, Persians: and that they would conquer them all was here made manifest. But as to their being in those countries, they were there in captivity, many of them: or else, the doctrines of the Law had become disseminated [among] the Gentiles in those countries. So then the testimony comes from all quarters: from citizens, from foreigners, from proselytes. We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.

For it was not only that they spoke (in their tongues), but the things they spoke were wonderful. Well then might they be in doubt: for never had the like occurred. Observe the ingenuousness of these men. They were amazed and were in doubt, saying, What means this? But others mocking said, 'These men are full of new wine' John 8:48, and therefore mocked. O the effrontery! And what wonder is it? Since even of the Lord Himself, when casting out devils, they said that He had a devil!

For so it is; wherever impudent assurance exists, it has but one object in view, to speak at all hazards, it cares not what; not that the man should say something real and relevant to the matter of discourse, but that he should speak no matter what. [They are full of new wine.] Quite a thing of course (is not it?), that men in the midst of such dangers, and dreading the worst, and in such despondency, have the courage to utter such things! And observe: since this was unlikely; because they would not have been drinking much [at that early hour], they ascribe the whole matter to the quality (of the wine), and say, They are full of it.

But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said to them. In a former place you saw his provident forethought, here you see his manly courage. For if they were astonished and amazed, was it not as wonderful that he should be able in the midst of such a multitude to find language, he, an unlettered and ignorant man? If a man is troubled when he speaks among friends, much more might he be troubled among enemies and bloodthirsty men. That they are not drunken, he shows immediately by his very voice, that they are not beside themselves, as the soothsayers: and this too, that they were not constrained by

some compulsory force.

What is meant by, with the eleven? They expressed themselves through one common voice, and he was the mouth of all. The eleven stood by as witnesses to what he said. He lifted up his voice, it is said. That is, he spoke with great confidence, that they might perceive the grace of the Spirit. He who had not endured the questioning of a poor girl, now in the midst of the people, all breathing murder, discourses with such confidence, that this very thing becomes an unquestionable proof of the Resurrection: in the midst of men who could deride and make a joke of such things as these!

What effrontery, think you, must go to that! What impiety, what shamelessness! For wherever the Holy Spirit is present, He makes men of gold out of men of clay. Look, I pray you, at Peter now: examine well that timid one, and devoid of understanding; as Christ said, Are ye also yet without understanding? Matthew 15:16 the man, who after that marvellous confession was called Satan. Matthew 16:23 Consider also the unanimity of the Apostles. They themselves ceded to him the office of speaking; for it was not necessary that all should speak.

And he lifted up his voice, and spoke out to them with great boldness. Such a thing it is to be a spiritual man! Only let us also bring ourselves into a state meet for the grace from above, and all becomes easy. For as a man of fire falling into the midst of straw would take no harm, but do it to others: not he could take any harm, but they, in assailing him, destroy themselves. For the case here was just as if one carrying hay should attack one bearing fire: even so did the Apostles encounter these their adversaries with great boldness.

For what did it harm them, though they were so great a multitude? Did they not spend all their rage? Did they not turn the distress upon themselves? Of all mankind were ever any so possessed with both rage and terror, as those became possessed? Were they not in an agony, and were dismayed, and trembled? For hear what they say, Do ye wish to bring this man's blood upon us? Acts 5:28 Did they (the Apostles) not fight against poverty and hunger: against ignominy and infamy (for they were accounted deceivers): did they not fight against ridicule and wrath and mockery?-- for in their case the contraries met: some laughed at them, others punished them -- were they not made a mark for the wrathful passions, and for the merriment, of whole cities? Exposed to factions and conspiracies: to fire, and sword, and wild beasts? Did not war beset them from every quarter, in ten thousand forms? And were they any more affected in their minds by all these things, than they would have been at seeing them in a dream or in a picture? With bare body they took the field against all the armed, though against them all men had arbitrary power [against them, were]: terrors of rulers, force of arms, in cities and strong walls: without experience, without skill of the tongue, and in the condition of quite ordinary men, matched against juggling conjurors, against impostors, against the whole throng of sophists, of rhetoricians, of philosophers grown mouldy in the Academy and the walks of the Peripatetics, against all these they fought the battle out. And the man whose occupation had been about lakes, so mastered them, as if it cost him not so much ado as even a contest with dumb fishes: for just as if the opponents he had to outwit were indeed more mute than fishes, so easily did he get the better of them! And Plato, that talked a deal of nonsense in his day, is silent now, while this man utters his voice everywhere; not among his own countrymen alone, but also among Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and in India, and in every part of the earth, and to the extremities of the world. Where now is Greece, with her big pretensions? Where the name of Athens? Where the ravings of the philosophers? He of Galilee, he of Bethsaida, he, the uncouth rustic, has overcome them all. Are you not ashamed -- confess it -- at the very name of the country of him who has defeated you? But if you hear his own name too, and learn that he was called Cephas, much more will you hide your faces. This,

this has undone you quite; because you esteem this a reproach, and account glibness of tongue a praise, and want of glibness a disgrace. You have not followed the road you ought to have chosen, but leaving the royal road, so easy, so smooth, you have trodden one rough, and steep, and laborious. And therefore you have not attained unto the kingdom of heaven.

Why then, it is asked, did not Christ exercise His influence upon Plato, and upon Pythagoras? Because the mind of Peter was much more philosophical than their minds. They were in truth children shifted about on all sides by vain glory; but this man was a philosopher, one apt to receive grace. If you laugh at these words, it is no wonder; for those aforetime laughed, and said, the men were full of new wine. But afterwards, when they suffered those bitter calamities, exceeding all others in misery; when they saw their city falling in ruins, and the fire blazing, and the walls hurled to the ground, and those manifold frantic horrors, which no one can find words to express, they did not laugh then.

And you will laugh then, if you have the mind to laugh, when the time of hell is close at hand, when the fire is kindled for your souls. But why do I speak of the future? Shall I show you what Peter is, and what Plato, the philosopher? Let us for the present examine their respective habits, let us see what were the pursuits of each. The one wasted his time about a set of idle and useless dogmas, and philosophical, as he says, that we may learn that the soul of our philosopher becomes a fly.

Most truly said, a fly! not indeed changed into one, but a fly must have entered upon possession of the soul which dwelt in Plato; for what but a fly is worthy of such ideas! The man was full of irony, and of jealous feelings against every one else, as if he made it his ambition to introduce nothing useful, either out of his own head or other people's. Thus he adopted the metempsychosis from another, and from himself produced the Republic, in which he enacted those laws full of gross turpitude.

Let the women, he says, be in common, and let the virgins go naked, and let them wrestle before the eyes of their lovers, and let there also be common fathers, and let the children begotten be common. But with us, not nature makes common fathers, but the philosophy of Peter does this; as for that other, it made away with all paternity. For Plato's system only tended to make the real father next to unknown, while the false one was introduced. It plunged the soul into a kind of intoxication and filthy wallowing.

Let all, he says, have intercourse with the women without fear. The reason why I do not examine the maxims of poets, is, that I may not be charged with ripping up fables. And yet I am speaking of fables much more ridiculous than even those. Where have the poets devised anything so portentous as this? But (not to enter into the discussion of his other maxims), what say you to these -- when he equips the females with arms, and helmets, and greaves, and says that the human race has no occasion to differ from the canine!

Since dogs, he says, the female and the male, do just the same things in common, so let the women do the same works as the men, and let all be turned upside down. For the devil has always endeavored by their means to show that our race is not more honorable than that of brutes; and, in fact, some have gone to such a pitch of (κενοδοξία) absurdity, as to affirm that the irrational creatures are endued with reason. And see in how many various ways he has run riot in the minds of those men!

For whereas their leading men affirmed that our soul passes into flies, and dogs, and brute creatures; those who came after them, being ashamed of this, fell into another kind of turpitude, and invested the brute creatures with all rational science, and made out that the creatures -- which were called into existence on our account -- are in all respects more honorable than we! They even attribute to them

foreknowledge and piety. The crow, they say, knows God, and the raven likewise, and they possess gifts of prophecy, and foretell the future; there is justice among them, and polity, and laws.

Perhaps you do not credit the things I am telling you. And well may you not, nurtured as you have been with sound doctrine; since also, if a man were fed with this fare, he would never believe that there exists a human being who finds pleasure in eating dung. The dog also among them is jealous, according to Plato. But when we tell them that these things are fables, and are full of absurdity, 'You do not enter (■ νο■σατε) into the higher meaning,' say they. No, we do not enter into this your surpassing nonsense, and may we never do so: for it requires (of course!) an excessively profound mind, to inform me, what all this impiety and confusion would be at.

Are you talking, senseless men, in the language of crows, as the children are wont (in play)? For you are in very deed children, even as they. But Peter never thought of saying any of these things: he uttered a voice, like a great light shining out in the dark, a voice which scattered the mist and darkness of the whole world. Again, his deportment, how gentle it was, how considerate (■ πικ■ς); how far above all vainglory; how he looked towards heaven without all self-elation, and this, even when raising up the dead!

But if it had come to be in the power of any one of those senseless people (in mere fantasy of course) to do anything like it, would he not straightway have looked for an altar and a temple to be reared to him, and have wanted to be equal with the gods? Since in fact when no such sign is forthcoming, they are forever indulging such fantastic conceits. And what, pray you, is that Minerva of theirs, and Apollo, and Juno? They are different kinds of demons among them. And there is a king of theirs, who thinks fit to die for the mere purpose of being accounted equal with the gods.

But not so the men here: no, just the contrary. Hear how they speak on the occasion of the lame man's cure. You men of Israel, why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made him to walk? Acts 3:12 We also are men of like passions with you. Acts 14:14 But with those, great is the self-elation, great the bragging; all for the sake of men's honors, nothing for the pure love of truth and virtue. (φιλοσοφ■ας ■νεκεν.) For where an action is done for glory, all is worthless.

For though a man possess all, yet if he have not the mastery over this (lust), he forfeits all claim to true philosophy, he is in bondage to the more tyrannical and shameful passion. Contempt of glory; this it is that is sufficient to teach all that is good, and to banish from the soul every pernicious passion. I exhort you therefore to use the most strenuous endeavors to pluck out this passion by the very roots; by no other means can you have good esteem with God, and draw down upon you the benevolent regard of that Eye which never sleeps.

Wherefore, let us use all earnestness to obtain the enjoyment of that heavenly influence, and thus both escape the trial of present evils, and attain unto the future blessings, through the grace and loving-kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost be glory, power, honor, now and ever, and to all ages. Amen.

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