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A living dog is better than a dead lion. The Day of Pentecost.

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Transcript

Ecclesiastes chapter 9. But all this I laid to heart, examining at all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know, both are before him. It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice.

As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more

reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.

Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white, let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life, and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol to which you are going. Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to those with knowledge. But time and chance happen to them all, for man does not know his time.

Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them. I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege-works against it.

But there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard.

The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. Ecclesiastes chapter 9 especially focuses upon the unpredictability of life and the interruption of death.

The lives and deeds of the righteous and the wise are in the hands of God. Divine sovereignty and providence, not human wisdom, prudence and righteousness, oversee all things. Although we might believe that by our righteousness and our wisdom we could direct the course of our lives, it is God who is in control, and he will direct our lives as it pleases him.

There are various views concerning what is referred to by the love and hate in the second half of verse 1. Daniel Fredericks observes the presence of love and hate connected with envy in verse 6. On this basis he argues that these belong to human beings, not God. No one knows whether they will experience love or hate from others. However, in light of the more immediate context, Michael Fox claims that it refers to God's favour or disfavour.

We don't know what our fortunes will be in advance. The same fate of death ultimately befalls all human beings, irrespective of their moral character and piety. No matter how different two persons may be in their behaviour and their relationship to God, death is the universal and ultimate equaliser.

Life swiftly passes and we will die. Life, however, is much to be preferred to death. Death is inert, it is the extinction of all possibility and potential.

The preacher describes this in terms of the arresting contrast between a dead lion and a living dog. William Brown writes, Associated with royal might and prowess and conflict, the lion was considered the archetypal predator, the model of a king from the kingdom of the wild, this king of beasts. But the lion's regal stature is worthless in death, Koheleth observes.

A dead lion is nothing more than a carcass, fit for the vultures. The dog, by contrast, was typically associated with filth and even death in ancient Near Eastern culture. Moreover, dog was frequently a term of contempt in biblical tradition and remains so in English.

Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to his folly. The lion and the dog were emblematic of opposing reputations, intelligence and folly, might and weakness, majesty and lowliness. According to the sages of convention, reputation is the individual's lasting legacy for future generations, it is the immortalized self.

But for Koheleth, the grovelling dog holds an absolute advantage over the lion's carcass. Life cannot be lived for the sake of the future, a dog at least receives the crumbs that fall from heaven. Strangely, for the preacher, the advantage of the living over the dead, in verse 5, is that the former know that they will die.

Perhaps their awareness of their coming demise excites their sense of the fleeting possibilities of the present. Man's period upon the stage of life is brief, and who knows what awaits him when he departs it to the darkness of the wings. The dead fade into the shadows, forgotten, their part in the drama of life over.

Dwayne Garrick maintains that the claim that they know nothing is not a claim about the metaphysical nature of the afterlife, or perhaps the lack of one, but is rather another way of making the preacher's claim that they know nothing more of the business of life. Their time has passed, and they have moved on. Whatever awaits us after death, the current brief season of life is the only such opportunity that we will have.

Geoffrey Myers uses Jesus' statement in John 9, verse 4 to illustrate this point. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming, when no one can work.

Verses like these might trouble Christians, who have a far more positive view of the afterlife. However, the afterlife in the Old Testament particularly is veiled in darkness

and shadow. To the extent that a continuing form of existence is envisaged, it is in the grave or sheol, a place to which all go, a place where men are much reduced from what they were in life.

While there may be continuing distinctions between the righteous and the wicked, the dead are all in a less fortunate position than the living. Positive hope for life after death only starts to appear as the promise of resurrection, of God's gracious, purposeful overcoming of the power of the grave, starts to come into view in the scriptures. And with the death and resurrection of Christ, there is a decisive change in the position of the dead.

The dead are raised up to God's presence to be with Christ. Consequently, following the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, death can be viewed very differently, indeed very positively. However, we should never forget that death used to have a quite different character and the only reason that it doesn't still have that character for the righteous is because God has acted decisively in history in Christ to change things.

Given the certainty and finality of death, the preacher exhorts his hearers to make the most of their span of life while they still can enjoy it. In verses 7-10, he gives a fuller expression of his frequent counsel to pursue joy in God's gifts in the midst of our toil. He lists some of the things that we should enjoy.

Sustaining and tasty food, wine to make our hearts glad, God's gracious approval of our works, comfortable, clean and attractive clothing, the refreshment of sweet-smelling oil and other things upon our bodies, and the pleasures of life with a woman that you love. God has given us these good gifts and as we know his gracious smile upon us and a right standing before him, all of these gifts should be delighted in. Holiness is not dullness, drabness and miserableness.

It's joy in the kindness and grace of God and the goodness of his world and his gifts within it. Justification and forgiveness, God's having approved to what we do, are gifts to be enjoyed. They give us relief from anxiety and the accusations of conscience and assurance of acceptance and standing with God.

Part of what it means to receive these things is to know true joy. We all have a limited window of opportunity in which to enjoy the possibilities of life and we should throw ourselves into it. Over time the rich array of possibilities that lie open to the young child dwindle and narrow and we find ourselves set in a particular course, perhaps yearning for a time when the possibility of us being something different still seemed open to us.

Rather, however, than yearning for now closed possibilities of the past, we should devote ourselves fully to the realization of those possibilities to which we have committed ourselves. Half-hearted activity should have no place in such brief lives. Toil is our lot in life and we should devote ourselves to doing it well and to pursuing joy within it and not

futilely longing for things that lie outside of our grasp.

Life is unpredictable. Fortune does not invariably favour the brave. We are all at the mercy of time and chance.

No man rises above fickle fortune or escapes the cruel interruption of death. However we prepare ourselves for the challenges and struggles of life, the vaporous movements of life and death will outwit and wrong-foot us. The Preacher tells the story of a poor man who illustrates both the fact that wisdom can exceed military might in its effectiveness, but also exhibits our limitations in the face of the swirling vapor of life.

This poor man delivered a besieged, weakly defended city with his shrewd wisdom, yet despite the greatness of his wisdom he was soon forgotten and unheard. We read a very similar story to this in 2 Samuel 20 verses 15-22 where a wise woman saves her besieged city from destruction by delivering the head of Sheba to Joab. We know of the existence and the action of this wise woman, but her name is forgotten to history.

Proverbs often teaches about the great power of wisdom, for instance in Proverbs 24 verses 5-6. A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might, for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counsellors there is victory. The poor man of the besieged city may not have gained personal fame, received regard or enjoyed status, but his wisdom is nonetheless to be preferred over the might of those who enjoy fame, wealth and honour, being foolish.

Unfortunately, although the poor wise man achieved great good through his wisdom, it is generally easier to damage and destroy than to create and establish. A one sinner or fool can do much harm. A foolish son can squander in a few years the great legacy that a family took many generations to create.

A wicked king can bring a mighty kingdom to ruin. An abusive minister can devastate a once faithful and flourishing church. These things too are tragic aspects of the vapour of life under the sun.

A question to consider, where in the New Testament can we see a positive vision of death that contrasts with the preacher's vision of it in this chapter? What are some of the ways that we can apply the teaching of the preacher here, while nonetheless recognising the difference between death after the advent of Christ and death prior to it? Acts chapter 2 verses 1-21 When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues, as of fire, appeared to them and rested on each one of them.

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from

every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language.

And they were amazed and astonished, saying, Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear each one of us in his own native language, Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians? We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God. And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, What does this mean? But others, mocking, said, They are filled with new wine. But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, Men of Judea, and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words.

For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel, And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even on my male servants and female servants, in those days I will pour out my spirit, and they shall prophesy.

And I will show wonders in the heavens above, and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and vapour of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

The story of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 is one of the richest texts in the entirety of the scriptures. It is filled with typological connections. In a few verses, a vast array of biblical background and a great many lines of biblical narrative converge.

Typology helps us to read the scripture, it helps us to understand the significance of events, and it could be argued that Pentecost is a foremost example of this. Paying attention to the context of the story, the way the story is told, certain key details, and all these things will help us to see the way that the story of Pentecost fits into the far larger picture of the rest of the scriptures. Fifty days after the resurrection of Christ, the spirit of Christ descends upon the disciples, preparing them for their mission.

It is important to understand the story of Pentecost in its context within the wider story. The event of Pentecost is organically connected with the event of the resurrection and with the event of the ascension that preceded it. The spirit can descend upon the church because Christ has ascended into the heavens.

We see connections then with the events that have immediately preceded, in the story of the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. But we also see connections with the

beginning of Luke's gospel. We've already noted the way that the book of Luke and the book of Acts have parallels.

The book of Luke begins with a lot of references to the spirit. The spirit overshadows the Virgin Mary so that Christ is conceived in her womb. In the same way the spirit will overshadow and the power of God will come upon the church so that they, in a way analogous to Mary, will bear Christ within their midst as a new temple of the Holy Spirit.

The spirit is also important in the story of the presentation. The spirit leads Simeon into the temple where he prophesies by the spirit concerning this child that is presented there. Much as the presentation in the temple occurred on the 40th day, so Christ ascends into the heavenly temple on the 40th day.

And then a man called Simeon, Simon Peter, bears witness to the Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. There is also an Anna who is praying constantly in the temple. After the ascension the disciples are also characterised by constant prayer in the temple.

Like Anna, they recall the character of Hannah at the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel. Much as Hannah was accused of being drunk by Eli the high priest, so they will be accused of being drunk by religious leaders of their own day who also lack perception. After the narratives of Christ's infancy there is another important story concerning the descent of the Holy Spirit and that is the story of Christ's baptism.

There is a transition from the ministry of John the Baptist to the ministry of Christ and the spirit descends in the form of a dove in a theophanic manner, propelling him into his mission as the son of God and the Messiah. The beginning of Acts is another transitional story, the transition from the ascended Christ to the ministry of the church. Once again there is a passing of the baptism.

The church is baptised by the spirit, the event foretold by John the Baptist, he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And when the church is baptised by the spirit they go forward in the power of Christ and continue what he has started. In Christ's gift of his spirit at Pentecost we have the ground prepared for the continuation and completion of the ministry that Christ has begun.

Christ's mission and the church's mission is one unified mission. And here we find ourselves held by reflection upon Old Testament parallels. The story of 2 Kings chapter 2 where Elijah ascends into heaven and the spirit of Elijah descends upon Elijah who continues the ministry of Elijah is a typological parallel that helps us to understand how the ministry of the church continues from and completes the ministry that Christ has started.

From a sense of the scriptural background of what's taking place at Pentecost an entire New Testament ecclesiology can be formed. We might see here themes of creation and

new creation. In Genesis chapter 2 the Lord breathes into man the breath of life and here he is breathing into a new humanity, the breath of his spirit, so that this new humanity formed in knowledge according to the image of him who created him would be a place where there is neither Jew nor Greek, circumcised nor uncircumcised, slave nor free, but Christ is all in all.

And in this new creation we see a restoration of God's people. In Ezekiel chapter 36 and 37 God promised to restore Israel. In chapter 37 we see the way that Israel was like a field of dead and whitened bones representing its whole house following God's judgement that had fallen upon it.

However as Ezekiel according to the word of the Lord prophesied to the dry bones the wind of the spirit comes and the dead whitened bones become a mighty living army. In Acts chapter 2 God is establishing his people once more. 120 disciples are gathered together under 12 apostles, an Israel that is the first fruits of a greater harvest in the future.

Such themes of first fruits and harvest might also make us think back to the origins of the Feast of Pentecost in an agricultural feast at the time of the wheat harvest. The grain harvest began with the barley harvest at the time of unleavened bread and it ended with the wheat harvest at Pentecost. The feast of first fruits occurred during the feast of unleavened bread and this was the basis for the numbering of the day of Pentecost.

Seven full weeks were numbered off and then on the day after the Sabbath they would celebrate the feast of Pentecost. The two tenths of an ephra of flour that were presented at the feast of first fruits became two leavened loaves that were waved before the Lord. The attentive reader of the book of Leviticus will notice a parallel between the numbering of the feast of Pentecost and the numbering of the year of Jubilee.

The feast of Pentecost is a miniature Jubilee. In Luke chapter 4 Jesus' public ministry began with a sermon declaring the acceptable year of the Lord, the year of the Lord's favour, the year of Jubilee. And now the beginning of the ministry of the church occurs at a mini Jubilee and the feast of Pentecost.

The feast of Pentecost had another important association. It was associated with the time at which God gave the law to Israel. The day on which the law was given was widely considered to be fifty days after the time of the Passover.

It was considered to have taken place on the day of Pentecost. At Mount Sinai Israel was gathered together. God promised to make them into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

At Mount Sinai the leader of the nation, Moses, ascended into God's presence and received the law which he brought down to the people of Israel. Fire and God's presence

came down upon the mountain. But the people rebelled against the Lord and against Moses and three thousand of them were killed.

In Acts chapters 1 and 2 we see that Christ, the head of a new people, ascends into heaven where he receives the Holy Spirit from the Father. On the day of Pentecost, the day on which the law was first given to Israel, Christ gives his spirit to the church. At Pentecost God made his people a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Fire and God's presence come down, not upon a mountain but upon a people. Whereas the people in Exodus were not fit to come into God's presence, the Spirit comes to dwell in the body of the church at Pentecost. Whereas three thousand rebellious Israelites were killed at Sinai, three thousand rebellious people are cut to the heart by Jesus Christ at Pentecost.

Recognising the parallels and also the contrasts, we can see something of the deeper New Testament theme of the juxtaposition of the law and the Spirit. The Spirit is the gift of the law, the gift of the law that is written upon the heart. That was always the promise of the new covenant and at Pentecost this is where it begins.

It's been written upon the heart of the people so that they might go forth in the power of the Spirit of Christ, bearing that law not just as an external testimony upon tablets of stone but upon something that is born upon their hearts and in their witness. The day of Pentecost then is a great turning point in the history of redemption. The law which had only resulted in bringing people into death was fulfilled as God gave His Spirit which established people in the new life of Christ.

As Paul says in Romans 8, verses 2-4, the law of the Spirit of life in Jesus Christ has made us free from the law of sin and death. At Sinai the tabernacle was established and the church is established as a new temple at Pentecost. In Exodus chapter 40 the glory cloud descended upon the completed tabernacle establishing the tabernacle as the place of God's special dwelling.

In Acts chapter 2 the Spirit descends not now upon a building but upon a people set apart to be a living temple, a dwelling place of God by the Spirit. We should note the verbal ambivalence of the word that's used for tongues in Acts chapter 2. It refers to both speech and to flame. This explores a powerful conjunction of imagery that is found elsewhere in the Old and the New Testaments.

God's word comes down in the form of fire and His word given to the church in such a manner enables the church to speak with the fiery power of prophets. The descent of tongues of flame upon the heads of the disciples might also recall other imagery from the temple and the tabernacle. In the book of Revelation chapter 1 the church is described as a candlestick.

A candlestick in the Old Testament is connected with the priest. It is also a means of giving light to dark places. The church has been lit as a priestly body to give light to the darkened world, a light that is given by the power of the Holy Spirit that burns upon and within her.

We should not quench the Spirit. As the people of God we should fan into a greater flame the Spirit that has been given to us. Perhaps we are also to think of ourselves as new altars.

We might recall the twelve stones that are brought together to form the altar on Mount Carmel by Elijah and then that altar is drenched with water and then the fire of God comes down upon that altar, upon those twelve stones and burns up the sacrifices upon them. We are being created as living altars, our lives and our actions being presented to the Lord as a living sacrifice. Beyond such themes of Sinai, Tabernacle and Priesthood we might also see kingly themes here.

In discussing Judas in chapter 1 we have already noted the similarities between 1 Kings chapters 1 and 2 and the book of Acts chapter 1 as the Davidic King is about to leave and is giving instructions to his successor who then has to establish the new regime. Within that parallel the event of Pentecost is framed in a particular way. It is framed as comparable to the event in which Solomon received the Spirit of the Lord to judge the people, the Spirit of Wisdom.

As the church is being established as a new ruling body, like Solomon it is given the Spirit of Wisdom by which it will act in a way that is prudent and good. Christ is establishing a new kingdom. In the book of 1 Samuel chapters 9 and 10 the prophet Samuel anoints Saul as the one who is designated to be the king and he tells Saul that there will be three confirming signs that he will receive on the way back.

First of all he will meet people telling him that the donkeys of his father have been found. Second of all he will meet people on the way who are carrying items of food, bread and wine and a goat and they will give him two loaves of bread. And then finally that he will meet prophets coming down from the holy place and the Holy Spirit will come upon him and he will prophesy and become a new man.

As he goes into Jerusalem Christ gives his disciples a number of similar instructions. First of all they will go into the village and find the donkeys. Then they will go into the city and follow a man carrying a water pitcher to the place where they will celebrate the meal in which he will give them bread and wine and they will celebrate the Passover.

And finally they will wait in Jerusalem until power comes upon them from on high. Like Saul when the Spirit comes upon them they will become new men and will prophesy. A kingdom is being entrusted to them.

So we should not be surprised to find these signs of the kingdom befalling them. Having seen themes of priests and kings we should not be surprised to find themes of prophets too. We have already observed some of the parallels between the story of Christ's ascension in the Church's Pentecost and the ascension of Elijah and Elisha's Pentecost in the book of 2nd Kings chapter 2. That story of prophetic succession is one that provides a paradigm for understanding what this story means.

We also observed the tongues of flame that descended upon them that lit their speech to give their speech power so that they might speak with different tongues and speak with the power of the Holy Spirit. Within the Old Testament witness we have a number of examples of prophetic installation where people are established as prophets of the Lord and empowered to speak in His name. We might think of Ezekiel's vision of the throne chariot in Ezekiel chapter 1 or Isaiah's temple vision in Isaiah chapter 6 or Moses' encounter with the Lord at the burning bush.

Such initiatory visions prepare the prophets for their missions in a number of different ways. They give them strength and resources for their tasks. They give them a firm awareness of their personal vocation and they loosely sketch the contours of their mission.

The appearance of non-consuming tongues of flame resting upon the heads of the disciples might recall the miraculous fire of the burning bush. Fire is an element associated with the Holy Spirit and His ministers. It being raised to participate in the divine council, prophets were elevated to share the status of the angels.

The prophet operates within the element of the angels, appearing with them in the divine council or moving rapidly and miraculously from place to place in the wind and the fire of the divine throne chariot. God's speech is like a consuming flame and the mouth of the prophet has to be prepared and kindled to burn with the fire of God's word as we see in places like Jeremiah chapter 5 verse 14. In Isaiah chapter 6 verses 6 to 7 the mouth of the prophet is cleansed and kindled with a live coal from the altar of the Lord.

The connection between the tongues of flame and the tongues of speech of Pentecost might draw upon this sort of association. The church is being lit as a witnessing lampstand and as a burning mouthpiece of the divine word. Here we might also think of events such as Numbers chapter 11 verses 16 to 30 where the Lord took of the spirit of Moses and empowered 70 elders of the people to exercise prophetic rule alongside him.

As the Lord descended in the cloud and placed the spirit of Moses upon the 70 they spontaneously began to prophesy in a remarkable but non-recurring manner. The desire that Moses expressed at that time, would that all of the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them, is alluded to in the promise of Joel chapter 2 verses 28 to 29. In his sermon on the day of Pentecost Peter claims that this prophecy is arriving at its fulfillment.

In the pouring out of the spirit upon the church a new prophetic people are being formed. As in Numbers chapter 11 the spirit of the leader of the people is distributed to others who will exercise gifted prophetic rule alongside and under him. And as in Numbers chapter 11 the reception of the spirit is accompanied by remarkable prophetic speech that manifests that something miraculous has occurred.

At Pentecost the spirit descends and rests upon the church in a manner comparable to the descent and resting of the spirit upon Jesus at his baptism. Perhaps the most typically referenced background for the story of Pentecost is found in Genesis chapter 11 in the story of Babel. At that point humanity is undivided.

They all speak a single lip and a single speech. They settle in the plain of Shinar where forming and firing bricks and using asphalt for mortar they undertake a vast building project. It's a two-fold project.

They want to build a city and they want to build a tower. One has a horizontal aim gathering together humanity in a city and the other has a vertical aim connecting heaven and earth. And within this mega city and the immense tower at its religious heart humanity would be preserved from being spread out throughout the earth as God had intended them to be.

God frustrated their designs as he descended from heaven and confused their lip so that they could no longer understand each other. Forced to abandon their building project humanity was scattered abroad across the face of the entire earth. This story of Babel provides a background for the story of the call of Abraham in the following chapter in Genesis chapter 12.

God calls Abraham and promises that he will make his name great. The tower builders had sought to make their own name great but God would make Abraham's name great. God would make Abraham a blessing to all of the nations that had been judged at the event of Babel.

In the book of Galatians we are told that the blessing of Abraham is the spirit and as we read through the story of Abraham and his descendants we might see how this connection is drawn. In the story of Jacob for instance when he reaches Bethel we have a number of echoes of the story of Babel. He gathers stones together as the Babel builders had gathered bricks.

He sees a ladder going from earth to heaven connecting the two and he names the place Bethel, the house of God calling it the gate of heaven. One of the translations of Babel is gate of God. It might seem that there is a connection between Babel and Bethel.

The true Babel, the true tower between heaven and earth is Jacob's ladder. In John's Gospel chapter 1 Jesus speaks of himself as if he were Jacob's ladder. He says to

Nathanael, Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

Jesus is the tower between heaven and earth. He is the one who has ascended into heaven and he has sent his spirit down so that in his spirit his people might be raised up to where he is. There is an ascent and a descent.

What Babel sought to achieve in man's own power God has provided in Christ. Pentecost also eclipses Babel's horizontal project, its attempt to gather humanity together. Babel was the moment when humanity was divided into many nations under judgement, each speaking their own languages.

At Pentecost many nations are brought together in a new building project, the building project of the Church. Although speaking many tongues, they are now expressing a single religious voice, as divine prophecy is given in many languages and dialects, not just in the religious tongue of Hebrew. The diversity of humanity becomes a vehicle for its religious unity and the era of the exclusivity of Hebrew has ended.

By implication Pentecost is a definitive and seminal moment in the fulfilment of the promise that all of the nations will be blessed in Abraham. Seeing so much scriptural background we should recognise something of the significance of the event of Pentecost, what it stands for and how it provides a basis for so much of the New Testament's thinking about what the Church is and what its mission should be. A question to consider, reflecting upon some of the New Testament teaching about the character of the Church, how can you trace it back to the event and the interpretation of Pentecost?