Pentecost, 2022

Old St. Patrick’s Church

A few weeks back I had the privilege of speaking

to a couple of hundred scientists

gathered for the International Vacuum Electronics Conference

in Monterey California.

How I received the invitation to speak to this group,

whose area of expertise is completely beyond my understanding

is a topic for another time.

My task for the assigned plenary was to be “inspirational”

And my presentation, “an apology to Galileo,”[[1]](#endnote-1)

was an homage to science and scientists.

In particular I suggested that

whether or not these scientists from around the globe

shared my belief system

their work was yet a boon to my own believing & preaching

especially because

of the powerful ways they deployed human imagination

the deeply inspirational effects of their explorations

and their willingness to confront unexplained mysteries.

Scientists daily face off against the inexplicable

And their delving into the unknown moves knowledge.

Current unsolved mysteries in the sciences include questions like:

What is the cause of Alzheimer?

Is light the ultimate speed limit?

What is dark matter?

Do we live in a false vacuum?

Is string theory a credible unifying formulation?

My favorite here is a question related to string theory

That of parallel universes.

The multiverse theory projects that

Many universes exist parallel to each other.

Some scientists contend that these ghost universes

invisible to us now

would have different timelines than our own

which could actually allow time travel

by stepping through a wormhole in space-time

allowing us to actualize our own “Back to the Future”

and intervene in other time periods.[[2]](#endnote-2)

What sparks these reflections about

mysteries and multiverses,

lateral timelines and back to the future musings

is this pivotal feast of Pentecost

which evokes, at least for me,

spiritual analogues about the multiverse,

both in the gift of the Spirit

and in the ministry of Jesus.

Regarding time, for example,

Notice how the texts we proclaim and sing today

Seem to confuse past and present

then and now

the completed and the promised

the already and the not yet?

Multiple propers assigned to this feast

confirm that the Spirit descended upon ancient disciples

but again today on contemporary worshippers,

that the Paraclete enlightened first believers

and opens the hearts of present-day baptized,

that the Spirit of Jesus imparted peace in the past

while remaining the enduring promise of peace for the ages.

When we pray, “Come, Holy Spirit … come, Holy Spirit”

We admit that the space-time continuum

Between the 1st century and the 21st century

Between Jerusalem and Chicago

Is eternally breached by God’s own spirit

Who cannot be confined by human theorems

Or contemporary physics.

And then there is the Only-Begotten

Who in Catholic-Christian belief

Is the very embodiment of parallel worlds

of a divine and human multiverse.

By contending that Jesus is truly human yet truly divine

We acknowledge a human nature

once embedded in our own history

has nonetheless transcended space and time

in its union with the divine nature

and shattered the physical and temporal gap

between Palestine and Palatine

between the 1st millennium and the 3rd millennium

and revealed in a unique way

how God freely negotiates chronology and geography.

While theologically impressive

such reflections could seem so speculative

so unreal, and so unrepeatable

that we might be left, again,

with one of the more daunting questions to plague

those seeking spiritual enlightenment and salvation:

“so what?”

So what that God can transcend time and space?

So what that Jesus can occupy parallel universes

of humanity and divinity?

So what that God’s Spirit can glide across cosmic time

And simultaneously materialize across human history?

That hasn’t stopped the war in Ukraine

Or thousands starving in Afghanistan

Or human rights being trampled upon here and abroad

Or the oceans rising in Micronesia

Or innocents being slaughtered in Texas.

The “so what” question easily arises

in the presence of an all-power God,

a kind of divine superhero unbounded by the laws of nature

while we mere mortals feel so vulnerable, feeble, even helpless.

Though we have been promised the gifts of the Paraclete

first in baptism,

again in confirmation

continuously in the other sacraments

and in every eucharist that invokes the Spirit

We do not seem to have been empowered

to emulate God’s capacity to breach the boundaries

off time and space

of war and division

of hunger and hopelessness … or maybe we have.

One of the more intriguing revelations at that inaugural Pentecost

reported in today’s first reading

was the miracle of tongues granted to the disciples:

the Spirit enabled gift to communicate

across the language divide

and engage a kind of holy vernacular

that was understood across a multicultural crowd.

An envious gift to be sure

Any of you who have studied another language

understand how frustrating

communicating across linguistic barriers can be.

Many years ago when trying to pass

a German requirement for school

I spent a summer at language school in Berlin.

While taking a break with a colleague

on one of the city’s famed waterways

I sat in a riverboard behind a British father and son.

The boy was maybe 4.

The father spoke crisp and simple German

and the child responded in a mix of languages,

unaware that he was easily floating

from English to German and back again

simply employing whatever vocabulary or grammar

that came to mind.

It was a little depressing to hear a 4-year-old

so easily bridge the language gap

while I was spending 6 days a week in a Goethe Institut

and clearly less fluent

Jesus, of course, had a similar gift,

even though he was not a multilinguist in the technical sense,

speaking primarily Aramaic and maybe some Greek.

But when we read the gospels with a metaphorical ear

We can hear that Jesus spoke innumerable languages:

He spoke outcast and leper

He spoke Samaritan and adulteress

He spoke tax collector and fisherman

He spoke Pharisee and Sadducee.

Besides these distinctive dialects, he also spoke

the universal languages of hope and healing,

acceptance and reconciliation

and the eternal language of love.

The celebrated peace emissary and reformer Nelson Mandela

spent 27 years in the prison at Robben Island.

Condemned as a revolutionary and terrorist,

he experienced endless humiliation and abuse

in the early years of his incarceration.

Many biographers agree that a key resource

that enabled “Madiba” to self-transform

from a militant radical to a peacebuilder

was the gift of language …

particularly the language of his oppressors.

Despite the vehement objections of some of his fellow prisoners

Mandela assiduously studied the language of Afrikaans,

devouring its poetry and literature,

developing fluency in this linguistic platform for apartheid,

even delivering speeches in Afrikaans after his release

and notably quoting the Afrikaans poet Ingrid Jonker

in his 1994 address to Parliament[[3]](#endnote-3)

His first as newly inaugurated President of the Republic

Mandela understood the power of language,

so much so that when South Africa became a democracy

and crafted a new constitution,

under his influence that constitution granted official status

to Afrikaans along with 9 other Indigenous languages

so that every man, woman, and child

could learn and flourish in their own tongue.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The philosophy underlying Mandela’s linguistic insight

Is often summarized in the phrase:

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands,

That goes to his head;

If you talk to him in his own language,

that goes to his heart.”

In baptism, when distinctively gifted with the Jesus spirit

We were commissioned in tongues

Not to speak to Parthian, Mede, and Elamite

But to speak to the stranger and the lost

the broken and the bereft

the marginalized and dismissed

and so become graced travelers

across the multiverse we call humanity,

healing the rifts resulting from alternate languages

of exclusion, diminishment, hatred, and greed.

**PIANO – SEND US YOUR SPIRIT**

Once there was a woman

Who forgot who her husband was.

The two went to a church

Where there was a lost-and-found room

For married people.

She stood facing one wall;

The man faced the other wall.

There he said her name,

But she did not hear her husband.

He repeated her name for 40 minutes.

If he said her name a certain way

She knew it was her husband.

It was the way he had said it

When they were first in love.

Whenever they lose each other

They go back to the lost-and-found room

To learn again their unique language of love.[[5]](#endnote-5)

This is our lost and found room

Where we return week after week

When we and the world have forgotten

How to speak to each other as sister and brother

When we and the world have lost each other

on the way to God.

On this holy feast, we are invited again to speak the Spirit tongue

To learn again those universal gifts of the Paraclete

So that they might resound among families and friends

Across cultures and countries,

And so, in hope and humility, we pray:

Send us, send us, send us your spirit, oh Lord.

1. <https://www.edwardfoleycapuchin.org/uploads/1/3/2/0/132090447/apologies_to_galileo.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://futurism.com/paradox-free-time-travel-parallel-universes> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/1994/940524_sona.htm#:~:text=The%20certainties%20that%20come%20with,Her%20name%20is%20Ingrid%20Jonker>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Michael Le Cordeur, Cordeur, “Mandela and Afrikaans,” in *Nelson Mandela*, ed. Crain Soudien (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2017), 45-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Herbert Brokering, “’I’ Opener: 80 Parables” (Concordia Publishing House, 1974), 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)