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)