

Divinely Intoxicated

A sermon on Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27 & John 15:26-27; 16:4-15 by Nathan Nettleton, 23 May 2021

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Message

If we surrender ourselves to the Holy Spirit, we lose some of our inhibitions about social conformity and are liberated to break down the boundaries that keep people apart.

Sermon

When God's Holy Spirit was first poured out on the followers of Jesus on the Day of Pentecost, they began behaving in ways which led many of the onlookers to conclude that they were blind drunk, off their faces, under the influence, pissed as parrots. And in their defence, the Apostle Peter does not say, "No this is perfectly normal behaviour." Instead he has to resort to pointing out that they can't possibly be pissed at this hour of the morning, because the pubs haven't even opened yet.

Obviously first century Jerusalem had very different liquor licensing laws to Melbourne today, because that defence would never stack up here. Here the nightclubs would only just be closing, and there would be a very high likelihood indeed of hoards spilling out onto the streets in a state of advanced drunkenness. But clearly Peter is not surprised by the perception of drunkenness. Something seriously intoxicating is going on.

Now, many of us have had the experience of non-Christian friends finding out that we are church-going believers, and looking at us as though we are stark raving mad. Just being a believer is often regarded that way nowadays – at least as socially unacceptable as public drunkenness, and a lot more unusual.

But it is also true that many of us Christians have often been so determined to appear as normal and ordinary as possible that we have been very careful and controlled about our public appearance and would never, under any circumstances be at any risk of being accused of being drunk, no matter what time of the day or night it might be.

So when we hear this story from the first church, part of the challenge is to look at ourselves and ask whether what was going on for them under the intoxicating influence of the Spirit is actually going on in some way in and through us too. Is there enough energy and wild non-conformity to make anybody wonder what we've been taking, or even to make onlookers pass any comment at all?

And if we appear far too sober and self-controlled to ever cause such questions, is it because what the Spirit was doing at Pentecost is being expressed in very different looking but equally effective ways among us, or is it just that we have so thoroughly quenched the spirit that there is really nothing going on at all?

My way into these questions tonight is via some observations about drunkenness and language. I can't speak as an expert on drunkenness. It is not that I have never been drunk; it is just that there are an awful lot of my contemporaries who have a lot more practice at it than I do. I have more experience of trying to speak in other languages. I can more or less carry on a conversation in Spanish, and I'm getting there in French if my conversation

partners are kind and speak slowly and clearly. I've also dabbled in a bit of Chinese, but I seldom understand anything I hear in it, so I'm not even remotely conversational.

It is my experience that being a little inebriated has an interesting effect on my language fluency. Once while on holiday in Brisbane, Margie booked us both in for a walking tour of the local craft beer highlights for my birthday. After five hours of drinking, we were hungry, and went straight from the tour to a nearby Spanish restaurant to eat. And as I spoke in Spanish with the impossibly cool Peruvian waiter, it seemed that my Spanish was far more fluent than usual, and his reactions would suggest that this wasn't just my drunken self-delusion.

Now it is not that hard to understand and explain this. Like many people who try to learn to speak another language, the biggest obstacle to my ability to converse in Spanish is not actually lack of knowledge or even lack of practice, it is inhibition and lack of confidence. I think I experience this even worse than many people because being a good communicator is such a central part of my sense of identity. Being unable to communicate well terrifies me.

But of course, one of the things that alcohol does to many people is to lower their inhibitions and fill them with confidence, often false confidence. So sure enough, when I had drunk rather more than I usually drink, I felt less inhibited and more confident and my Spanish flowed. There is no miracle involved. It is not that I was able to say anything I had never learned. It is just that what I had learned was not running into the wall of inhibition that often keep it bottled up inside. The cap was off, so to speak, and it flowed.

It is often said that alcohol doesn't change a person, it just unmask them, so I am pleased to say that when unmasked, there is a reasonably capable Spanish speaker lurking inside me. That unmasking thing is also why there is such a contrast between happy drunks and nasty violent drunks. When the inhibitions are removed, we find out who people really are.

Which suggests one more thing I want to note about drunkenness before I return to connect all this with the Pentecost experience. Have you noticed that one of the other things that happens with happy drunks is that the loss of inhibitions results in them talking to everyone as though they were long lost friends? All the usual social constraints about only opening up to your own kind go out the window and people drunkenly pour their hearts out to people who they might coolly avoid when they are soberly maintaining their image.

So what was going on on the Day of Pentecost that raised the suspicion of drunkenness? It can't have been the languages miracle. When Kevin Rudd surprises Australians by standing up in public and speaking perfect Mandarin Chinese, nobody says, "He's obviously drunk."

So why the suspicion of drunkenness? Surely it's the lack of inhibition and concern about social propriety. A bunch of people were speaking more freely and garrulously than usual, and they were speaking freely to the kinds of people they weren't expected to be talking to. They were ignoring all the usual social barriers and boundaries that keep people apart, and were talking freely with those who were regarded as outsiders, as off limits.

When the Spirit of God took hold of them, their sense of social walls collapsed, and like garrulous drunks, they were everybody's friends, reaching out to all, joyously and generously, with no sense of acceptable and unacceptable, insiders and outsiders, 'our' people or 'those'

people. The Holy Spirit, much like alcohol, brought their inhibitions crashing down and liberated them to pay no attention to what other people thought about social propriety, about who was okay and who wasn't, who was fit to talk to and who wasn't. They just gushed with love and joy and enthusiasm, and the boundaries were washed away. No wonder people thought they were drunk!

And unfortunately, that is quite a contrast to the ways many of us Christians behave most of the time. We are much more known for our sober and careful maintenance of proper appearances, for carefully policing the boundaries of right and wrong, of saved and unsaved, of who's in and who's out. Too often we are far too conscious of what others might think if we are seen to be friendly with 'those' people, the wrong sort of people. We are afraid of the suspicions, the whispers, the perceptions of guilt by association.

And perhaps we are actually not so confident about the gospel after all. Perhaps we are more afraid that others might corrupt us than we are confident that the Holy Spirit in us might be infectious enough to impact them. Quite a contrast to Jesus himself, who always seemed quite sure that his love and mercy were far more contagious than anyone else's corruption or brokenness.

Did you notice what Jesus said about the Spirit in our gospel reading tonight? He said that when the Spirit comes, she would "prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment". Sin and righteousness and judgment. Aren't these exactly the things that religious people usually get all hung up on and which function to keep them apart from other people?

All the world has thought of sin and righteousness as entirely separate categories which divide the world and become the basis of judgement. We thought judgement was about dividing us up on the basis of sin and righteousness, and deciding who God would accept and who God wouldn't. Sin and righteousness and judgment. Outsiders, insiders, and strict boundaries. Things that we police and watch carefully lest we are seen to be compromised.

But Jesus said that the Spirit would prove us wrong about these things, and sure enough, when the Spirit is poured out, propriety goes out the window and the boundaries collapse and there don't seem to be any insiders and outsiders after all. There is just one great mass of humanity, warmly loved by God and generously forgiven in Christ, and invited to drink freely of the one Spirit that they might all recognise one another as brothers and sisters, be they Jew or gentile, Parthian, Mede, Elamite, Cretan or Arab, male or female, rich or poor, worker or unemployed, educated or illiterate, gay or straight, trans or cis, citizen or asylum seeker, sick or healthy, latte sipper or bogan, sober or drunk! Add your own categories.

Surely this Spirit-intoxicated unity and love is the destiny that the Apostle Paul says the whole creation is yearning and groaning for, groaning in labour pains as it seeks to bring it to birth from the midst of our tight and controlled and oh-so-sober old world. All creation groans and sighs and longs for the new day to come to birth and for the sons and daughters of God to be seen in all all their glorious diversity and intoxicated boundary-breaking unity. And we know that yearning in our hearts too, as the Spirit groans and intercedes within us in sighs too deep for words.

So here we are, gathered around this cyber-table, hopefully embodying some of that boundary-breaking diversity as we seek to surrender ourselves to what the Spirit is doing in us

and through us. And while I am not advocating actual drunkenness, nor condemning it, I will be more than happy if people sometimes look at us and think we are a little crazy and a bit over-enthusiastic and a whole lot too friendly and too loving and too merciful to those who the world says we should shun. The Spirit is poured out, and everything is new. Drink deeply and let the party continue!