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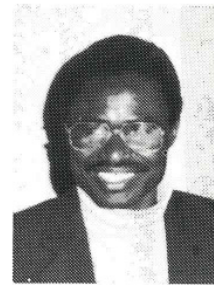
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The birth of a new community of mankind

Bible Study on Acts 2,1-13, Ramatea, 12 October 1993



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The text takes us to the beginning of the early church, entrusted by Jesus to ensure the spreading of the Good News in the whole world, starting by Jerusalem. The birth of this new community of prayer, of witnessing and of service did not come about accidentally. Like every other act of divine creation, it was object of diligent preparation. The persons chosen to assist in putting into practice this new missionary structure had to undergo an initiation rite. We will come back to this experience later on, when we will relate it to the black African rite of initiation.

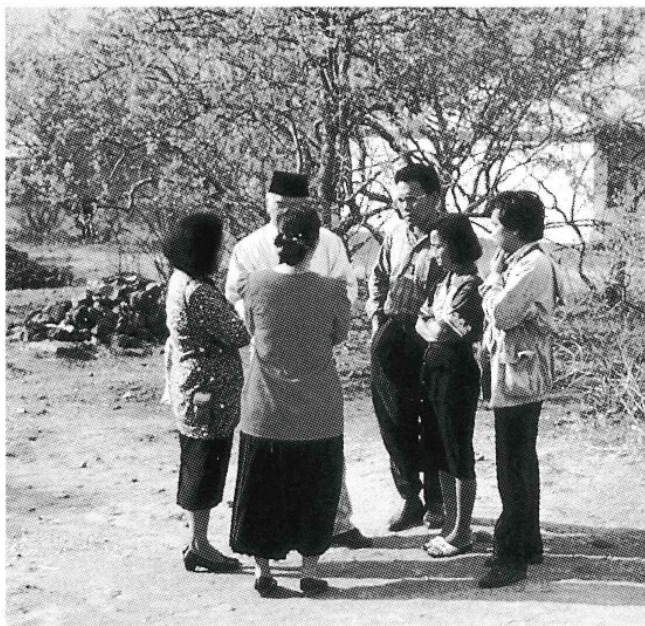
St. John the Baptist described the spiritual operation which Jesus was about to carry out in the hearts and souls of the disciples in the following terms: „I baptise you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit“ (Luke 3,16).

Verses one to four of the second chapter of Acts places us in a new setting of christological initiation aimed at forming a new community equipped to build a more humane world, to develop an atmosphere of life dominated by love, faith, hope and truth. The birth of this new ecclesiastical structure was object of diligent preparation. Conceived by God, the father and creator, in Christ, the initiator or master, the new community had to come into being and grow within and under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Twelve persons were selected to be initiated by the divine master to the mystery of the conception and creation of the new community. We find them all, with the exception of Judas, who was replaced by Matthias, in the upper room waiting for that to happen which the father had promised: to transform their weaknesses into constructive forces in service of a new humanity ruled by the spirit of love and sharing.

THE INITIATION OF THE MEMBERS OF THE NEW COMMUNITY

Similar to the young men in African villages, the disciples of Jesus could only become members of the new community of men and women by passing through an initiation rite. The first stage of this operation consisted in teaching them the mystery of the incarnation, birth, life, death



and resurrection of their Lord. The recruitment of disciples and the selection of the apostles were also part of this first stage of initiation into the mystery of the construction of the Kingdom of God on this earth inhabited by men and women.

The second stage consisted in locking the disciples, men and women, into the upper room to prepare them to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Before the experience of the first Pentecost, the disciples' main preoccupation after the death of Jesus had consisted in deliberating the destiny of Israel. They freely expressed their political worries in the following words: „Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?“ The Lord answered sharply: „It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth“ (Acts 1,7-8). Thus, the master directed the profound and legitimate aspirations of his disciples towards the essential, the coming of the Holy Spirit. Their mission should depend totally on the spirit of God. Without this supernatural power, they would not be able to assure the liberation of men and women created in the image of God.

The day of Pentecost, the twelve were all gathered in the upper room transformed into a sort of initiation camp. They were placed into a setting favourable to the actions of the Holy Spirit in their personal lives and in the life of their community. The period preceding the advent of the Holy Spirit was a time of preparation within the fellowship of disciples. They had to set in order the relationship between each other before they could get into contact with the power of God. „All those with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers“ (Acts 1,14). The women were part of this fellowship of disciples initiated by Jesus. Moreover, some of them were better acquainted with the mystery of the resurrection of Jesus than the twelve.

In verses 15 to 26 of the first book of Acts, we see the disciples reorganising their team to better respond to the new challenges. Matthias was chosen to fill the gap left by Judas. It is in this state of mind that they were „suddenly“ visited by the Holy Spirit coming „from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting“ (Acts 2,1-2). The atmosphere in the house was transformed radically. The disciples weren't the same anymore. They were reborn into a new community of man-

kind. They hadn't become angels. They were still men and women, only totally transformed in their ways of thinking, of speaking and of acting in the world.

Acts 2,4b-13 describe the manifestations of this new experience. The gift of the Holy Spirit had given the disciples new languages, i.e. new structures of comprehension and communication of the miracles of God. All of a sudden had they become communicators across cultural borders. God thus granted them the ability to transcend their ethnocentric language, the boundaries imposed by their religious and political perception of the world - so that they were able to understand each other and other cultural

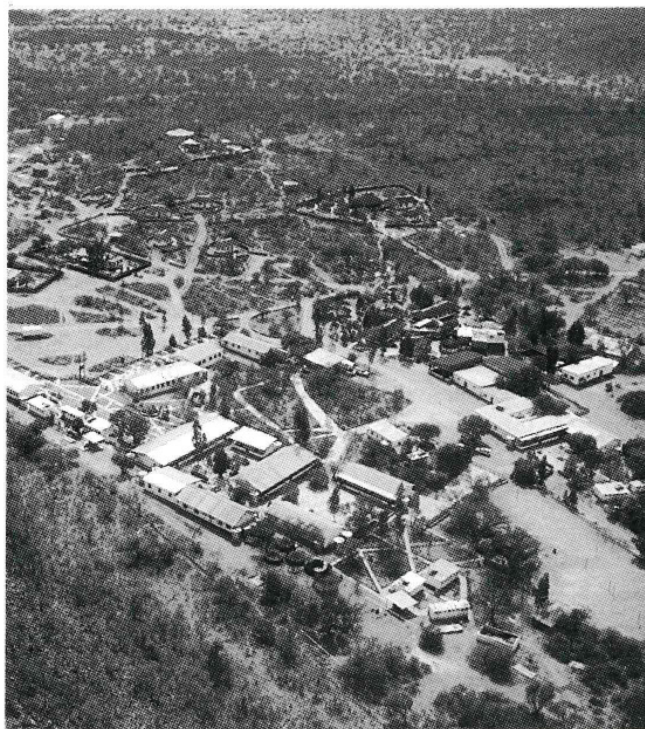
groups within the perspective of salvation granted mankind by God in Christ.

The Holy Spirit allowed the disciples to identify themselves with other peoples also intent on reconstructing mankind in Christ (Acts 2,5-12). Even those mocking were able to hear what they said (Acts 2,13). Similar to the seventy men of the elders of the people of Israel, who gathered with Moses around the tent to receive the divine spirit which should render them capable to understand and put into practice efficiently the mission of Yahweh for the salvation of his people (compare Numbers 11,24-30), the disciples of Jesus were locked into the upper room to await in prayer the coming of the Holy Spi-

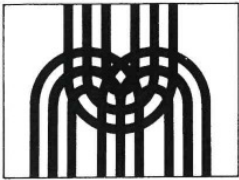
rit upon them and into every one of them, so that they could better grasp the meaning of the mission the Lord had entrusted them with and to accomplish God's will in the history of mankind.

The Holy Spirit initiated the disciples into intercultural communication so that they could start spreading the Good News in the whole world. Henceforth, all the world was able to hear and pronounce in their own languages the magnificent works of God. The inexpressible thus became expressible.

The Holy Spirit transformed the Jewish association of disciples into a universal fellowship of faith and witnessing alive in the love of God and in sharing.



Ramatea Church Activity Centre, Botswana: venue of the UIM-General Assembly, 11-18 Oct. 1993



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THE MIRACLE OF PENTECOST IMPLIES THE DISCIPLES' COMMITMENT

The men and women having received the gift of the Holy Spirit and the supernatural ability to communicate the message of salvation in different tongues had to be committed to renounce their ethnocentrism, thus giving the Holy Spirit the possibility to build up a new community of mankind. The birth of this community had to pass through the death of the old religious society dominated by ethnocentrism, individualism and egoism. The disciples were not fully conscious of all the consequences this new experi-

ence had on their fellowship and on their personal lives. Committed to the new path they had taken, they were obliged to face up with their own ethnocentrism and to let themselves be guided by the spirit of love, of sharing and of truth.

THE MAIN PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

As an apostolic fellowship, i.e. following the footsteps of the apostles of Jesus, we have to become conscious of the necessity of divine initiation within our respective churches and our missionary and diaconal organisations. In deciding to call together representatives of all our partner churches in Ramatea from 11 to 18 October, VEM/United in Mission has

committed itself to a process of initiation which will lead to the radical transformation of its structures and its members. May every one of us be conscious of the practical implications of this new experience of initiation.

In these times of profound and radical changes in the world, in these times of political, ideological, moral, social and religious crisis, the world expects neither the community of Christ nor VEM/United in Mission to invent a new „-ism“, but rather to develop new structures of communication in which all languages and all cultures, all men and all women may come together to contribute to the birth of true humanity restored by the resurrected Lord and made possible thanks to the powerful action of the Holy Spirit and to the glory of the Father.

More than ever, the Christian community is in need of a new Pentecost to renew and transform its old structures and those which govern them - with the aim of efficiently facing up to the mission that God has bestowed on Christians in this ailing world.

The Christian community is called to make use of its imagination and develop coherent and systematic plans of mobilisation to prayer and missionary commitment to save this world grovelling in misery and stifled by tyranny and injustice of all sorts.

Diafwila-dia-Mbwangi

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