

Sermon for 19th May 2024, Year B, Pentecost.

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Pentecost is one of the few times during the church calendar when I get to wear my favourite red stole, which was made by a Cornish seamstress for my ordination as a priest, and it cleverly incorporates the Celtic cross with a rainbow of colour that if you look closely actually shows a Cornish coastal scene with the blue ocean, the green cliffs and the orange sunset sky.

The colour red has always represented two things in the church. First, it represents the blood of martyrs who were killed because of their faith. This is why clergy wear red vestments in Passiontide leading up to Christ's crucifixion, and why in churches that celebrate saints' days, if the saint was a martyr, the altar would have a red frontal and so on.

But there is another association with red, and that is fire. Today on the day of Pentecost we celebrate the Holy Spirit descending on the disciples in the upper room. The Spirit's arrival is described as divided tongues of fire, arriving with the rush of a violent wind, and resting on each one of them.

In the Jewish faith, fire represents the presence of God. Remember the burning bush where Moses is told to take off his sandals because he is on holy ground; Elijah was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot, and pillars of fire led the Israelites as they journeyed to the promised land. I've read that some Roman coins also depict tongues of fire resting on the head of Caesar as a sign of his supposed divinity, so this holy gift being given to very ordinary people is a provocative and powerful image indeed. The tongues of fire show that divinity and humanity are being fused together into something entirely new – or perhaps restored to what God had intended all along.

We have here a very vivid description of the arrival of the Holy Spirit into the life of the Church, no longer as something that occurs at a distance, that mere mortals must not approach, but direct contact between humanity and divinity, so that the disciples are immediately transformed. Indeed, in the Orthodox churches of eastern Europe and the Middle East, the main focus of their faith is what they refer to as divinisation – literally the process of a person’s character being transformed by the Holy Spirit to become like God – overflowing with unconditional love – a gift promised not just to a few holy saints, but to every human being who desires it.

The first change for the disciples is that they lose all their fear. They move swiftly from cowering in upper rooms and hiding from their persecutors to proclaiming God’s love in the streets. And they are suddenly able to communicate in other languages. It is like a reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel, in which all the people of Earth were divided from each other by different languages because of their arrogance. Instead, the first act of the Holy Spirit is to enable the whole of humanity to hear the message of peace and reconciliation being spoken in the name of Jesus.

It's no coincidence that this transformation happened when it did, during an ancient festival where Jews from all over the world would return to celebrate at the temple in Jerusalem. Pentecost is a Greek word – Pentecostos – which simply means fifty, since this festival was originally fifty days after the Passover, just as Christians celebrate it fifty days after Easter. The Jewish festival also had another name – Shavuot – which marks the first wheat harvest of the year in Israel, and commemorates the giving of the Torah – the first five books of the bible – by God to Moses at Mount Sinai.

Shavuot, then, was one of the three great pilgrimage festivals of Judaism, so if you’d been in the marketplaces or the temple, you would have heard an enormous mix of languages. The bible mentions a whole list of people and places:

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia and so on. So, what better time could there be for the disciples to receive this amazing gift, just as everyone was arriving for their holy day – or holiday!

It is a reminder to us that our Christian faith is never separate from the rest of our lives. God is never about separation, but is always trying to bring people together, to unite heaven and earth and different peoples and cultures, not in a spirit of domination and control, but in mutual understanding, compassion, and a peaceful respect for differences.

The coming of the Holy Spirit is certainly disruptive – the tongues of fire associated with divinity are wild, uncontrollable, impossible to ignore. If we carry on reading Acts, we soon see that the Holy Spirit doesn't seem to follow many of the previously unbreakable religious rules. Peter has a vision in which God tells him that the Jewish food restrictions no longer apply. Then he is instructed by the Spirit to visit a Roman centurion and his household, something which Peter says is forbidden for Jews, and while he is there preaching about Jesus, the Holy Spirit falls on the Roman family, and they all begin praising God, even though they haven't even been baptised. And so, Peter is forced to conclude that the Holy Spirit is now in charge and leading the way.

The gift of God's Spirit cannot help but break down the barriers that human societies like to raise up between people; it re-opens broken-down communication and inspires understanding through love. This is not something that happened once upon a time to someone else, but is a gift for all humanity, for all time, even for this moment, despite all the suspicion, aggression, conflict and despair we see in the world.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is the realisation that you, too, are God's beloved child. He delights in you. For sure, he knows all your secret faults, but he kneels beside you, waiting patiently for you to realise he is there, and that you have long since been forgiven. You may know it in your head, but I want you to feel

it overwhelm your heart today – to hear God himself say, I love you, I made you, and you are beautiful in every way, and to feel the warmth of his affection flow through you from head to toe. And when you start to say, ‘but I’m not worthy...’ he simply smiles, puts his finger on your lips, and blesses you joyfully. This is the Holy Spirit, the reality of Pentecost. God’s beautiful harmony made up of all our mistakes, wrapped up in love.

Pentecost by Malcolm Guite.

Today we feel the wind beneath our wings
Today the hidden fountain flows and plays
Today the church draws breath at last and sings
As every flame becomes a Tongue of praise.
This is the feast of fire, air, and water
Poured out and breathed and kindled into earth.
The earth herself awakens to her maker
And is translated out of death to birth.
The right words come today in their right order
And every word spells freedom and release
Today the gospel crosses every border
All tongues are loosened by the Prince of Peace
Today the lost are found in His translation.
Whose mother-tongue is Love, in every nation.