Sermon for 8th June – Year C – Pentecost

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Acts 2:1-21

Sermon

What's your favourite way to communicate with your friends and families? Is it Telephone? Email? Facebook? Facetime? Zoom? Do you have a family Whatsapp group? Are you into Instagram or Tiktok? Or do you perhaps prefer to speak face to face?

What all of these means of communication have in common of course is the use of words and language. How hard it is to understand each other if we don't speak the same language! And how much harder it is to learn a language if it doesn't even use the same alphabet as our native tongue!

I wonder if anyone knows what these say?

[Tess holds up sheets with 'God loves you' written in various languages and scripts, finishing with one in English].

Being able to speak or read other languages helps us to understand other people and their experiences, and to share ideas. So, perhaps it's not surprising that the first gift that God gives to Jesus' friends and disciples at the feast of Pentecost through the Holy Spirit is the ability to be understood by everyone who hears them. How else could they share the good news about Jesus, the sort of person he was, his teaching, why he had died and been raised again to new life?

And what better time to be given this gift than at Pentecost, which was 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. It was a real Jewish festival at the time, and not just something Christians made up later to celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The Jewish festival also had a Hebrew name – Shavuot – which means 'weeks', referring to the seven weeks plus one day that have passed since the Passover. In the bible, Shavuot marks the first wheat harvest of the year in Israel, and also commemorated the traditional 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, the others being the Passover itself, and Sukkot, the festival of booths or tabernacles in September or October. So, if you'd been in the marketplaces or the Temple at this time, 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. Most of us probably have no idea where many of these are, but each would have had their own local language and the Jews that lived there would naturally have brought these languages to Jerusalem with them.

What better time for the disciples to receive this amazing gift, then, just as everyone was arriving for their holy day – otherwise known as a holiday!

But what about Scotland? Do we really need to be able to speak many languages here? I'd love to wake up on Pentecost morning as a fluent Scots or Gaelic speaker without any effort – sadly it didn't happen again this year. But there are apparently 170 different languages spoken in Scotland, and when the 2011 census asked what language people used at home, the most common languages after English were Scots, Polish, Chinese, Scots Gaelic, Urdu, Punjabi, and French, in that order. Even in our own congregation we have members whose first language does not even come in that list. So how useful it would be to be able to

communicate with such a wide range of peoples and cultures when sharing God's message.

But to be honest, even speaking the same language doesn't always mean we can truly understand each other. You only have to look at social media, or politics in the news, to see that many people who all speak English can't understand where each other is coming from at all! And we all know that younger people use language differently from older people. My nephews and niece are older teenagers now, and even though they use the same words as the older generations, you can be sure they don't often mean the same thing. My oldest nephew recently claimed not to know what 'charisma' meant, but his generation uses the word 'rizz' to mean much the same thing, except of course they've turned it into a verb, so that rather than just having rizz you can also rizz someone, which means to seduce them.

We can go on: rich people often find it hard to understand the experiences of poor people, exemplified in the infamous phrase "Let them eat cake!" supposedly – but not really – uttered by Marie Antoinette before the French revolution. And I've often found that when living in rural villages, the strongest disagreements and arguments are actually with the next village a few miles along the road.

So, I wonder if this amazing Pentecost gift from the Holy Spirit was always as much about understanding one another, as being able to literally speak many languages. Being multilingual was (and still is) a huge advantage in the cultural melting pots of the world, but even more important is being able to relate to other groups and put ourselves in their shoes – to see things from someone else's perspective – to have empathy. This is the gift of an open and generous heart, that listens and doesn't judge, and this is a gift that the Holy Spirit offers us and invites us to embrace, every day of our lives. A heart full of understanding

and love is surely the best way to show anyone who Jesus truly is and why all humanity should pay close attention to all he said and did.

Two thousand years after the first Pentecost, God's Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, is still helping us to understand and love people who are different from us. Remember that we are the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within us, inspiring us to every good thing we do and say. Remember this most keenly when you look into each other's eyes, and into the eyes of everyone you meet. They also bear the imprint of God's love.

The more we open ourselves with humility to listen to one another and to God, the more the Church will become a place of true inclusion where everyone can hear the God of love speak to them in their own mother tongue, which is the language of the heart.

God Loves You! *'Ha gowl ek DEE-a or'!*