

Pentecost Sermon

9th June 2019

Acts 2: 1-21

On Pentecost Sunday two years ago, I unexpectedly attended morning worship at St John's Anglican Church in Ghent, Belgium. I was in Ghent with the Ipswich Choral Society and several of us had taken up an invitation from the Vicar to augment their choir for the Pentecost service. As I sat in the multi-cultural, bilingual service, I was struck by the poignancy of it being Pentecost and by my surroundings. The faith community of St John's meets in the former St Elizabeth Roman Catholic church, located on the site of a vacated Carmelite convent. As the English and Dutch words resounded round the enormous sanctuary, I found myself profoundly moved by the way that a small group of committed people, had welcomed strangers into their midst, without asking our faith credentials, but recognising that singing would be a connecting form of communication. The Vicar made no modifications for us and when it came to the Eucharist, he simply said – all are welcome.

A fellow chorister turned to me and said – 'I don't know what to do, I haven't been to church for years, I don't feel I can come for communion'. 'Would you like to', I asked, 'the Vicar has said that all are welcome'. 'I don't know', she said, so I explained that she could come up with me, or receive a blessing instead, if that would feel more appropriate. When I looked into her eyes, I saw that she was full of emotion. After the service, the woman couldn't stop telling people what an amazing experience she had had. She had not understood everything that had gone on, least of all what Pentecost really was, but she had felt welcome, attended to, and affirmed. 'I didn't realise this was what church today could be like', she exclaimed. I felt much the same!

How to explain what happened? How to explain what the Spirit can do?

The lectionary texts for today all take different approaches to exploring the work of the Spirit.

The Psalmist, focusses on the Spirit as life-giver. The playful delight God has in the diversity of creation extends even to the chaos of the seas and the leviathan (sea monsters). Perhaps we are only now beginning to realise the fragility of our planet – and not for nothing does our discipleship and mission mandate include care for creation through our stewardship of the world's resources. If all creation proclaims God's glory, should we abuse that? After all, as the Psalmist concludes by saying 'I will sing praise to my God while I have my being', should we prevent all creatures, flora and fauna from doing likewise – to be their very selves as an expression of the glory of their creator?

For John, the Spirit is subtler but no less focussed. The function of the spirit is to enable the disciples to be reminded of who Jesus is, and of his teachings, after he has left them. Here the Spirit is known and recognisable because the Spirit accords with what is known about Jesus and his character. The one who is the *Paraclete*, the Advocate, offers what is necessary for the disciples ongoing work. But this is not a Spirit who is for the disciples only, for filled with the Spirit they will be sent into the world.

For Paul, the Spirit is one who is among and within, and suffers alongside. This is not an absent, distanced God, but one who draws us close. Given the precarious nature of following Jesus and the hostility that accompanies those who proclaim him, the Spirit that is present within and alongside the believer, in their suffering; is one that enables the assurance of belonging.

So, who might the Spirit be for us? Turning to the reading from Luke/Acts, we see that the Holy Spirit is the community creator. As we are drawn back to that Day of Pentecost we're invited by some scholars to understand that the

coming of the Spirit was to reverse the kind of human-made community that happened at Babel. Instead, using imagery of theophany – the presence of God manifest in wind and fire – we’re invited to see the Spirit of God, re-creating what it means to be the people of God, not by giving up their own identities (illustrated by their own languages), but by being welcomed in, in their own language.

This year I have been particularly struck that part of the miracle that day, was that the people wondered ‘how is it that we hear?’ To hear is more than the words coming in our direction. Hearing with understanding means being able to *listen*. In her blog on this passage ‘Jo Bailey Wells’ says, to listen to understand is a skill – an act of love.

To have been given the gift to listen, with understanding, surely means that to be given the gift of God’s Spirit is, then, to receive a gift of love from God.

This week I have been reminded of the importance set upon creating environments conducive to listening. Because to understand, who we are, what history tells us, to make meaning and to look forward, requires the commitment to listen attentively.

I have been mindful of the contrast between the remembrance associated with two anniversaries. The first, the 30th Anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Apparently, Hong Kong and Macau were the only places in China where people could commemorate the events of early June 1989, when troops rolled into Tiananmen Square to break up peaceful protests led by student activists calling for social reform. Authorities kered media content (commenting on the event and the actual number of those killed has never been officially released). In the UK and other parts of Europe earlier this week, there were commemorations of the 75th Anniversary of D-Day. An integral part

of the events and accompanying reportage included eye witness accounts and personal testimony from veterans and those who worked in the services in 1944. In both places, the emblematic sentiment was 'Do not forget to remember'. Is that not also what we are about to do when we gather around the communion table and re-affirm the central sacrament of our faith?

So often, when we are feeling defensive or fearful, we lose the ability to hear. The Spirit's work is to counteract that in an act of divine love. The disciples' circumstances had not changed, but they had. Their ability to speak, and others' to hear with understanding, started a new movement from the gospel message being relevant to Jewish hearers to being distributed throughout Asia Minor, and onwards...to today.

Are there times when we need to be able to listen more attentively? Are there places where it is difficult to listen? Are the people that we find it hard to listen to? And have we grown tired of the effort to listen in order to understand, preferring instead to remain behind the locked doors of our own perspectives or known experiences, instead of being open to God's Spirit indwelling in us the confidence to move ahead into new possibilities. May I suggest that you take a moment to allow one person, place, or time, to come to mind and allow the Spirit to empower you to be the agent of change.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us, freshen us, renew us, open our eyes to the needful tasks and our own abilities to fulfil the work. Draw us together as your people, emboldened to speak but as those who do so in response to your Spirit's work of love in our lives. May your mediating love build a path from loneliness to company, from antagonism to co-operation and may we declare you to be the source of all living. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

