



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 6th November 2022
Reading: Acts 19.1-8

Famously, Groucho Marx (1890-1977) once said, *'I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member.'* Such is the low view of themselves that makes many people feel there's no place for them in the Church. They see it as a club of the unappealingly righteous, rather than a school for the downright ordinary.

Mohammad Ali had a different perspective: *'I am the greatest. I said that even before I knew I was.'* Whilst I can see that might have got him to be the champion boxer he was, I am not persuaded that it is the ideal definition of a Christian life. The followers of Jesus know themselves to be dependent upon the mercy and grace of God, and devoted to showing it to others.

So, in contrast to both Groucho and Mohammad, we sang, *'Just as I am, without one plea but that thy blood was shed for me...'*: 'just as I am', with all my qualities and quirks in a heady cocktail; 'just as I am', with a lifetime of stuff I'm proud of, but, also, too much that shames me; 'just as I am', male, pale and frail, but ever so glad that not everyone else is; 'just as I am', exhilarated by the joy of love when life is good, and burdened by love's exquisite pain when life is hard.

When I wrote to the people nominated for the Eldership, I commented how none of us feels good enough for ministry or for membership in the Church; and frankly, I'd be anxious if we did. Moreover, in discussion with Kate, Martin, Pippa, Rebekah, Tanya and Zoë, although they would sum up their thinking about God in many and varied ways, none of them told me of the dogma they espouse, less still of the perfection they embody. Rather, all speak of discoveries that delight them, whenever glimpses of God are caught in momentary slithers of revelation, whether they come through art, through caring, through manual or intellectual dexterity, or through faith in action in the community. Interestingly, I don't think we often discover those slithers of revelation without determining to look for them. Might that be what it is to be committed Christians – to be those forever seeking and always open to unearthing something more of God as God is in Jesus Christ?

The reading from Acts 19 found Paul in Ephesus, an important cosmopolitan commercial centre in what is modern day Turkey. It was a place in which Christianity quite quickly took root, rapidly becoming one of the most significant Christian communities, after Jerusalem and Antioch. But that was not without opposition. The city's renown, apart from for trade and culture, was for worship of idols, and, truly remarkably, at the Temple of Artemis, which would later be included amongst the Seven Wonders of the World. Also known as Diana, Artemis has been described as 'the most famous and most worshipped Mother Goddess in the ancient world for over 1,000 years.'¹ She was believed to protect women, not least in childbirth, and to bring relief to women in need.

To be a Christian in Ephesus was therefore to be counter cultural. Different. Paul meets twelve people purported to be Christians, but he is not so sure. He asks if they are familiar with the Holy Spirit – because he holds that it is the Spirit that authenticates a person's Christianity; it doesn't leave them where it finds them. It seems these twelve have been baptised by John, and that it had had been a sort of Baptism Part One. Sure, it had turned

¹ Available at <https://earlychurchhistory.org/beliefs-2/paul-in-ephesus-a-clash-of-cultures/>
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them away from their old life, but it hadn't immersed them in a new one, inspired and energised by the Holy Spirit.

So, St Luke's narrative tells of them getting Baptism Part Two, at the hands of Paul. This anoints them for the fuller life of a Christian, manifesting its gifts and fruit. Specifically, we hear of them speaking in tongues, and prophesying.

Now, there are all sorts of ways to understand this 'speaking in tongues'. There's the elated worship thing – where people are so arrested by the Spirit that their language becomes unique and unintelligible, save with someone to interpret it. This is characteristic of a form of Pentecostalism, and I respect it as other people's experience of the Holy Spirit. But it is not mine.

In my experience, the Spirit is about building up and unifying the Church. Although it is God's 'transforming spiritual energy'², I have known such ecstatic worship get in the way by being confusing, and even divisive. Indeed, one way of reading Isaiah 28 suggests that he is cautioning against 'speaking in tongues' because it provokes 'those who do not believe to persist in unbelief'.³

Anyway, such exoticism it is not the only way that the New Testament describes the work of the Holy Spirit. Far more frequently than implying that it's about ecstatic worship, Paul describes the Holy Spirit as sharing wisdom, mediating knowledge, and invigorating mission. And as is so well known, in his famous words to the Corinthians, he highlights three impacts of the Spirit that 'will last forever, faith, hope and love ... and the greatest of them all is love'. We may be lost in ecstatic worship all we like, but if we have no love, we're a clanging bell or crashing cymbal.⁴

Listen to Acts 19.6 again: 'the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied'. Might Paul have in mind that speaking in tongues is actually speaking out in the name of God, offering God's critique of the failings and flaws of Ephesian society, challenging things like idolatry, oppression and marginalisation? Moreover, if Paul's own example of speaking in tongues is to be emulated, it is 'bold' as he 'argues persuasively', for a sustained period of three months in Ephesus. It's not the hit and run prophetic proclamation of the visiting preacher, but the week in, week out word of the one who will repeat the challenge until it makes a difference.

Might it be that today speaking in tongues is not just about Pentecostal worship? Could it be that our words of prophecy need to be 'in tongues', or in the power of the Spirit? What I'm wondering is this, in this era when the world seems to be losing its bearing and getting lost in an amoral fog, do we need the Holy Spirit to help us prophesy in words that go beyond genteel convention that God loves us, and arrest us with ideas about what it means to live under God's reign of justice and peace?

So, we may be able to see how full life in Christ, which comes from the Spirit, doesn't leave us where it finds us, any more than it did those twelve Paul met in Ephesus. It has an impact upon our lifestyle. Yes, just as in first century Ephesus, discipleship in 21st century Cambridge, with its temples to acquisition, academia and atheism, is to be no less counter cultural.

Downing Place Church is no theologically mono-chrome community. Nor is its membership satisfied by a single and narrow style of worship. There are spectra of these things, and we

² Johnson, Luke Timothy *Acts* in the Sacra Pagina series of commentaries page ????

³ Welker, Michael 1994, tr John F. Hoffmeyer 2013 *God the Spirit* Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock page 267 – cf Isaiah 28.11ff

⁴ cf I Corinthians 13

occupy diverse places along them. Equally, though, I don't sense that we are comfortable with a way of being disciples of Christ, of being the Church, that leaves us merely treading baptismal water. Why else did we take two churches and make them one, in order that their witness to the reconciling power of the Gospel could be seen in our own life? Why else did we rejuvenate this building so that it was as effective a tool of mission for tomorrow as it was for yesterday?

And so it is that as Kate, Martin, Rebekah, Tanya and Zoë become members, as Pippa is commissioned to be a Street Pastor, and as we all renew our commitment to the church, with ten of us offering for eldership, we are opening ourselves to that on-going work of the Spirit: to worship authentically, to speak persuasively, and to love radically.

I suppose we might say that *coming* just as we are, we are *going* in response to Jesus's invitation, 'will you come and follow me?' wherever it leads. Let it be so. Amen

N. P. Uden

6th November 2022