

Sunday 19 May 2024
Pentecost

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Acts 2:1-21
NT: Romans 8:22-27
Gp: John 15:26-27; 16: 4b-15

There is something very reassuring about traditions; they give us structure and reassurance in a world of uncertainties. Often something to hold firm to when all around is changing. Those traditions may have been handed down from generation to generation or adopted relatively recently. When those traditions are removed, we may feel unsettled. As an Everton fan I am struggling myself today as on this the final day of the Premier League Season, the usual tradition of a relegation scrap has been removed.

The Jewish feast of Shavuot 'The Festival of Weeks' is the day when the first fruits of the land were offered in the Temple. On this day the Book of Ruth is read in synagogues, telling how the Moabite widow called Ruth, and her mother-in law, Naomi, meet the owner of the land, Boaz, while they were out gleaning in the fields. Ruth later married Boaz.

Shavuot is also the day when, just seven weeks after the Hebrew people departed from Egypt on their 40-year long journey in the wilderness, recorded in the Book of Exodus, Moses receives the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai. Sinai was observed to be covered in smoke because God had descended upon it like fire. Thunder and lightning filled the air.

It was on this day, according to St. Luke's account in the Acts of the Apostles, that the followers of Jesus, all Jewish, gathered in one place. The experience that follows is replete with graphic details. Sound, like a violent storm wind, tongues of fire leaping about. The wind-like sound fills the room, and the flames perch on each of them. This describes the Holy Spirit – this is the first experience for followers of Jesus of the Holy Spirit. This is the Christian Shavuot – not the law being given, but grace; this is the Christian Shavuot – not the first fruits from the harvest being presented, but the first fruits of the Holy Spirit.

I wonder how the disciples were feeling that first Pentecost morning? They were all gathered together in one place, coming together because of tradition in worship, looking for reassurance and stability. But again – feeling stunned by the turn of events. What a few weeks they had experienced.

So here we find them, gathered together for Shavuot. – a major festival first recorded in Deuteronomy 16, a celebration of the harvest and a giving of the first fruits to God. And the disciples were back together again to celebrate looking forward to the stability of a religious festival that they all knew so well. Because we can all be like that, can't we? In a changing world, worship can come to represent stability and predictability in an unpredictable world. But often what we don't account for is our unpredictable God who comes to meet us in worship. Certainly, that is the lesson of the people of Israel throughout the Old Testament and, if the disciples had learnt

anything since Jesus's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, it must have been the unpredictability of God when we truly open ourselves up to him.

The disciples are together, ready to meet with God as they always had done. But things are different now and God uses this moment to fulfil his promise and send the Holy Spirit upon them. And this Pentecost moment was indeed a moment of fulfilment; a moment when the prophecies came true. A moment when the promise of Jesus to send the Spirit came true, a moment when the promise of the renewal of the people of God is fulfilled. Pentecost is a time of fulfilment. But it seems to me that Pentecost was also more than that. As well as being a time of fulfilment, we can describe it as a time of abundance too.

Now, in the Church of England, we are not very good at talking about abundance. I don't think that is necessarily a denominational thing. I think it is more to do with the English national characteristic: we are fairly reserved as a people, and we don't necessarily feel comfortable with 'abundance'. But that is what Jesus wants for us, of course.

In John 10:10, Jesus says, 'I have come so that they may have life in abundance'. And here, in Acts 2, at Pentecost, we see that the verbs are verbs of abundance, the descriptions are descriptions of excess. Acts 2 has been described as a passage of saturation. Let me just give you a few examples:

'They were all together...'

'Suddenly from heaven...'

'The rush of a violent wind...'

'Filled the entire house...'

'A tongue of fire rested on each of them.'

'All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.'

'I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.'

'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Do you see what I mean? Throughout this passage, there is abundance, there is excess, there is saturation, there is an overflowing of God into the experience of human beings and even into the experience of the whole created order. And in that moment of pure abundance, as the abundant Spirit falls upon them all, each and every person hears the Good News in their own language. You see the abundance of God is ultimately personal. When the Spirit comes in abundance, he comes to you and he comes to me and we receive him in our own language which is to say, each according to our own need.

Each one of us experiences the abundance of God as we need to in this moment. And yet, despite the individualism of God's Spirit meeting each one of us in our need, there is a community response too.

As God meets with you, as God meets with me, so a new community is born: a community of people who have been met by God and know what it is to bathe in his Spirit. The reality is that we may all speak different languages, we may all experience God in different ways, we may all have a different picture of God, we may all encounter his Spirit differently, but the Spirit makes us all one community joined in fellowship by our common experience of God.

As Paul says in I Corinthians 12: "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all." So the challenge to each one of us this Pentecost, the challenge to us as a church, is to respect the differences we have, to respect the fact that each of us may want to describe our encounter with God differently and express our encounter with God differently – but ultimately to recognise that we are all one in God. We are brothers and sisters in the Lord.

The Spirit has made us one. So, as a church, we are called to celebrate diversity and yet live in unity. The language of God, expressed on the Day of Pentecost, was a language of unity through diversity. There is one Lord, one Church, one Baptism but the Spirit comes to us in diverse ways and each of us hears the Good News according to our own language.

What does it mean for you to receive the Good News in your language yet celebrate how others may receive that Good News? What does it mean to you to develop tolerance – and not just tolerance – but a spirit of celebration in difference? It is God's desire for a spirit of Pentecost to inhabit all churches – including our church here in the centre of Liverpool: a spirit of Pentecost that enters the walls of our church and blows amongst us both settling on us and unsettling us. A spirit of Pentecost that will empower us and renew us and lead to the renewal of our community in Christ. A spirit of Pentecost that will make our hearts sing and our souls yearn for God in ways that we have never yearned for God before.

Our prayer for St Nicks is that we would become a Pentecost church; experiencing the coming of the Spirit of God, experiencing joy and hope, exhibiting love, celebrating difference, living in unity, proclaiming the Good News of Christ in all we think and say and do. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us we pray. Amen.

Pentecost is called the 'birthday' of the Church, and we celebrate it today. But there would have been no Church if the apostles had remained behind closed doors, secure in the knowledge of their salvation and indifferent to those outside. Two thousand years later, we need to push at the walls of our churches, throw open their doors, and allow the abundant message of new life to touch, embrace and saturate all who lie beyond.

Fr Bill Addy