

Acts 2.1-21

Psalm 104.25-35,37

Romans 8.22-27

John 15.26-27, 16.4b-15

.And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2.2-4)

- If you have a friend who comes from outside the UK, living here or abroad, put up your hand
- If you have a family member, parent, spouse, in-law, cousin etc. who is from another country or lives abroad, put up your hand
- If you speak a language other than English –well enough to have a basic conversation, put up your hand

Nearly everybody put their hand up – perhaps something to do with the fact that Cambridge is a place that attracts lots of people of foreigners and therefore enables all sorts of connections and relationships.

Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' life was a place like that. We heard that devout Jews from every nation under the heaven lived in Jerusalem. We have no idea if the first apostles, guys like Peter, John, Andrew would have put their hands up at the questions I just asked, though I suspect they might have.

Nevertheless they were as surprised as everyone around them that the first consequence of the Holy Spirit descending on them was for them to start speaking in other languages. NT scholars point out that there is a phenomenon called 'glossolalia', where people speak in unintelligible language when they experience some great religious emotion – something that happens time and time again in periods of religious excitement in the Christian Church. – the best known recent one is the Toronto blessing.

But on the day of Pentecost we are not dealing with unintelligible language. These devout Jews from every nation under heaven are able to hear their own language spoken – the Holy Spirit is reaching out to them speaking of ‘God’s deeds of power’. (Acts 2.11)

Taking control of the situation, Peter is moved to quote words from the prophet Joel

*“In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.*

Given what’s just happened, the dream must include that all the nations are brought together, in peace and righteousness, in the worship of the one God.

On that day of Pentecost, the beginnings are made for a church that will spread across the world including people of all nations, ethnicities, abilities and backgrounds.

Later on in the same chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we learn that about 3000 people were baptized as a result to these events and Peter’s speech. We also learn, that these first Christians devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, fellowship – gr. *Koinonia*’ Community, breaking of the bread and prayer.

From this story of Pentecost, we draw two fundamental insights about the work and presence of the Holy Spirit which are as relevant now as they were 2000 years ago:

- The Holy Spirit connects people of different nationalities, ethnicities, backgrounds, abilities and **diversity** is at the heart of the Church.
- And, secondly, the Holy Spirit encourages and enables **deep community** - communion: as people hear and believe the gospel, they are drawn to share God’s life through Christ, which means having communion with God, and to share their lives with each other – to have communion with one another -sometimes to the extent that they even share all their possessions.

The Holy Spirit enables diversity: The Church’s record over the centuries in welcoming diversity, and especially foreigners, has not always been brilliant, but it’s at the heart of the gospel, and

important at a time like now, when there is so much discussion and anxiety about foreigners coming to live in this country. Many think of them a threat rather than people to get to know. Of course, in practice, large numbers of migrants present real challenges to our social and economic life, but these are not insurmountable, given the terrible situations some of these people have fled. And, of course, it is not always easy to get to know people from other countries, especially if they prefer to stay in their own communities and language groups. But, the Holy Spirit reminds us that they, too, are created in God's image. Most of us here have the experience of being very much enriched by getting to know someone from another country, learning about their culture, customs and approach to life. Being aware of difference, we are likely to expand our horizons and learn to value diversity, rather than feel threatened by it. The Holy Spirit invites us to be bridge builders and foster relationship, including with people of other faiths.

The Holy Spirit is the creator of community – communion .– Communion with God and with one another go hand-in-hand.

And again, thinking about our own society and culture, there is such an emphasis on the needs of the individual, or the individual family, on achievement and success. At the same time many long for community; for meaningful relationships and engagement, for being loved and valued as a human being; to share the search for meaning, for faith & God with others in life with others, and to find and give support to each other.

The Holy Spirit creates community that is diverse. It's called the Church – we all are part of it. And just as the Holy Spirit was so powerfully at work on that day of Pentecost when she came down on the apostles, she is at work in each of us and among us, encouraging, enabling, if we let her.

We are starting our annual stewardship campaign today, when we invite everyone at St James to prayerfully consider their financial support for the work and mission of St James Church. The early Christians were so dedicated to their newly found community and mission in Christ, that they decided to share all their possessions – for the work of the church and the needs of the poor. That has not proved practical, although members of most religious communities still give up their possessions for the sake of the whole. We are the church, here in this place, and our giving, however small or big, makes all the difference for the flourishing and mission of this church.

Quoting Rowan Williams' sermon which we heard last week (*preached at Westminster Abbey on Ascension Day 2015 on the occasion of consecration of bishops*): 'The Church is here so that the invitation, the power, the energy, the heartbreaking love and challenge of God in Jesus Christ will go one being enacted, day by day, hour by hour, [here at St James, decade by decade].

It's part of our calling to join in the work of the Holy Spirit, who connects people, overcomes barriers and differences, building community and communion, so much needed in today's world.

We may take our friendships, our family relationships with people from other countries for granted. . But, they are part of the work of the Holy Spirit – and if they are people with whom we share our faith, or our search for meaning, for God, with whom we experience community/ communion, we get a glimpse of that dream of connecting all the nations.

Today, as we celebrate Pentecost, let us pray, that like the first apostles and Christians, we, too, may be open to be filled with the Holy Spirit wherever that leads. Amen.

1282