Sermon for Pentecost Sunday Year B

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

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I remember the day I drove around Donington Park race track in a Ferrari. I had been given a day at the racing circuit, building up from a super-mini, to a Lotus and finally to a Ferrari. I’ve never driven anything as powerful since and although I enjoyed careering round the circuit, I couldn’t help but feel that my instructor was rather underwhelmed by my sedate effort. At least, that is how if seemed to me after he took the wheel and showed me how. I was unaccustomed to the sheer power of the machine and so I played it safe.

There are rather a lot of Christians who are just as cautious about Pentecost and the Holy Spirit: many of us fear the power and play it safe.

Yet Pentecost is all about the power of God infusing the people of God to fulfil God’s mission in the world. Just as in Genesis, the man God had formed from the earth was dead, although in the form of a man, until God breathed into his nostrils, so the Church is in the form of the Body of Christ, but without the Spirit is dead.

Once the Spirit comes, the disciples stop hiding in the Upper Room and take to the streets. The Spirit gives them the power to challenge the world. In John 16:8 we read that one of the Spirit’s intentions is to prove the world is ‘wrong’ about Jesus: the Spirit will convict the world of the ultimate sin, which is to refuse to believe in Jesus; the Spirit will show that Jesus is the embodiment of righteousness and that only in Jesus can the evil in this world be overcome.

The Spirit transforms those whose lives the Spirit touches. This is the mission of the Church, to ‘turn the world upside down’ and to herald a new creation coming into being through Christ.

Such dramatic change and raw spiritual power frightens some Christians. They would rather not take on the world, or be the cause of such upheaval in people’s lives, or take responsibility for setting history upon a new course. Yet such is the power and will of the Spirit to do such things.

Sometimes the Church acts more like a brake than an accelerator, more like a horse-drawn wagon than a Ferrari. But I believe that anyone who has a real encounter with the living God should experience just a bit of fear as well as exhilaration. After all, our God is a mighty God.

Is your God a respectable, tame and feeble God? Such a God is not the God of Pentecost. Luke tells us that some mocked on the day of Pentecost and said the disciples were full of new wine. Peter, full of the Spirit, was not afraid of such opposition. I suspect God is no more frightened by western neo-liberalism than he was of those who laughed on the day of Pentecost.

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Luke tells us that each of the disciples was touched by a flame of the Spirit. Each of the disciples was enabled to speak in tongues. This is because everyone who is part of the Body of Christ receives the Holy Spirit, for each one of us belongs and each one of us has our calling to fulfil.

The coming of the Holy Spirit reverses the alienation that sin created in the story of Genesis 3. Before Adam and Eve took the forbidden fruit, they were able to walk and talk with God in the Garden of Eden. When the Spirit comes, that inner intimacy with God is restored.

In Romans 8:22, Paul speaks of believers ‘groaning inwardly’ like the birth pangs of a mother giving birth. For those who receive the Spirit experience a rebirth into a new way of understanding the world and their life within it. Henceforth this world will never be able to satisfy all our needs; our inward being will constantly grow and change by the Spirit’s influence and yearn for more.

Paul then tells us that the Spirit will pray for us when our inner groaning lacks the words to express what we need or what we long for. Pentecost leads us back to that full intimacy symbolised in the Garden of Eden story, which will grow from one degree of strength to another in this life and know its full restoration in the life of heaven.

Both John and Paul, however, tell us through their epistles that it is not the gift of ‘speaking in tongues’ that is the hallmark of whether the Spirit is truly at work in the believer, but that the only authentic marker of the Spirit at work is love.

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Luke’s account of the day of Pentecost presents us with a list of unfamiliar and unpronounceable places which were represented in the Jerusalem crowd that day. In a sense, they already enjoyed the unity of being Jewish believers, either by descent or by adopting the faith as proselytes. They would all have understood common Greek too. But Luke gives us the list of places for a reason. They are said to be ‘from every nation under heaven’ (v 5).

The Spirit of God is not just for the apostles present in the upper room, but for all those believers assembled there. The Spirit then speaks through the believers to the assembled crowd which Luke describes (at second hand because Luke was not present on the day itself) as addressing each of them in their own language. The places named form a rough circle around Jerusalem. This new message is a message for the whole world to receive. Yet the first to hear the Good News were the Jewish people of the Roman world.

The fact that some believe the apostles are drunk suggests that the apostles were ‘speaking in tongues’ rather than ‘speaking in other earthly languages’, but commentators do vary in their understanding of Luke’s account in this regard. The important aspect is that the Spirit brings a new unity among them all. Perhaps we could describe it as diversity in unity since the distinct places are named and the crowd claim to hear ‘each one in his own language’.

Some commentators suggest that Pentecost can be seen as a reversal of the divisions caused by the Tower of Babel when humanity was divided by language and race following their hubristic attempt to scale the heights of heaven. If this is so, the symbolism only partly works, for Luke does not say they all heard in one single language, but ‘each in his own’. So perhaps Luke is trying to tell us that the gospel is for all humanity, but that does not mean uniformity; Christian faith will wear slightly different clothing as it travels across the world and through time.

In John 16:12 Jesus tells his disciples that he has much more to tell them, but they are not yet ready, but the Spirit will guide them into all truth.

This continues to be one of the great sources of tension for Christians around the globe and throughout time; how diverse can we be and remain truly one Body of Christ? How closely must we follow the ways of the first Christians to hold truly to an ‘apostolic faith’?

Unity is one of the criteria for being an effective instrument in God’s hands. Jesus prayed for our unity (John 17:22) and we read that on the day of Pentecost, they were ‘all together in one place’ (Acts 2:1). Yet later, despite the crowd being speakers of Greek, Luke tells us the apostles addressed them in different languages.

The Church has forever struggled with those who wish to emphasise unity at the expense of diversity and those who wish to emphasise diversity at the expense of unity. That both have a legitimate part to play and a delicate balance must always be sought seems clear; how well we achieve that, however, is a difficult question.

Perhaps the emphasis needs to change at different times. Today, the world is more fully connected than ever before through trade and technology, and yet it is also showing deepening divisions between nations, between different groups and parties within nations and gathering tensions between world military powers. I would suggest our current situation requires us to emphasise the unity the gospel brings to humanity, for if our unbridled diversity gets out of hand, the whole world, not just the Church, may blow up in our faces.

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