

Pentecost is the future

St Philips' Anglican Church, O'Connor
Pentecost Sunday— 4 June 2017

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Acts 2.1-21; Psalm 104.25-35; 1 Corinthians 12.1; John 20.19-23

Today is often called the birthday of the church and that's a good thing! I have never given birth, but I have seen first-hand that birthing is exhilarating, painful, joyful, emotional, exhausting. The birth of the church is a bit like that and it could be argued the church is still being born; remember St Paul: 'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God'. He goes on to talk about labour pains! It's a very long labour!

Different writers however see the birth of the church in different ways. One writer claimed that a better place to mark the birthday of the church is described in the gospels of Mark and Matthew. When those two evangelists describe the conclusion of the Last Supper, they say exactly the same thing: When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. The Church is born! Jesus at that point says to the disciples: 'You will all become deserters; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered."' This is tough; this writer is trying to tell us that the story of church begins with its members—having been fed by Jesus—scattering far and wide, denying him, watching at a distance as he is crucified and only then slowly gathering again, tentatively, sometimes with doubts, but becoming aware that Jesus is alive and then finding their feet, their voice.

This is what the church is still about: the daily struggles that we all deal with, and then gathering, sometimes tentatively yes, perhaps bringing doubts about this rumour of God, but nurturing that sense that yes, Jesus is alive—and then finding our pilgrim feet and our voices. The Church is born out of pain, exhilaration, doubt, joy, fear, peace.

In this Festival of Pentecost and the birth of Church, we are, I believe, experiencing the birth of multiculturalism ... another painful birth that is ongoing. We heard this morning Luke's description of this gathering of folk in Jerusalem—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. What an extraordinary gathering; indeed, it is the known world of the day. This is multiculturalism writ large!

The Pentecost narrative is often described as an undoing of the story of the Tower of Babel in the Book of Genesis. Chapter eleven of Genesis begins: 'Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.' Those monolingual, monocultural folk decided to settle down, and to build a city and a great tower. They had discovered a new technology—bricks and bitumen rather than mud and stones—and this new technology was to be their foundation. But they are scattered by God who decides that this uniformity, isolationism, will not do. Diversity, difference, will be the mark of these folk and the work of bringing these different folks together will be the work of the Spirit, a true foundation. We have the same problems with technology today, don't we? We are all squeezed into the uniformity of Google, some protest...you Apple folk. But the technophobes tell us that technology will be the foundation of our unity when of course it so often scatters.

I don't fully understand what it was that occurred that morning in Jerusalem, but it was clearly something quite extraordinary. The reading we heard in Acts this morning does not suggest that one language was being spoken and it was not some strange mystic tongue. The folk we listed above said 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear,

each of us, in our own native language?’ This is no uniformity but different people from diverse backgrounds and languages. Just for a moment imagine what this looked like. There were Libyans, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Iranians, Turks and the rest. Imagine the clothing, the food, the music...remember they are celebrating, it was the feast of *Shavuot*, the festival of the spring harvest and the giving of the law at Sinai; it was one of the major Jewish festivals. In the Pentecost event, God gathers people together through a language they can understand. In the Gospel of John, the coming of Jesus is compared to the coming of a new language. One writer put it: ‘Jesus is the word, the language of God which comes to be a language for humanity.’ We can get a hint from Paul’s letter to the Romans: ‘that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.’ The mind of the Spirit speaking through the disciples is the will of God.

The will of God. Surely God’s will is that his Kingdom come. So, whatever occurred that day, it was the beginning of a new era. This is not achieved by words, not even great oratory. It is not achieved by abstract principles, grand plans, value systems, or regulations. The kingdom of God is, as Paul reminds his correspondents in Rome, ‘righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.’ How is achieved? Well, I believe as Christians our faith tells us that it has already been achieved or at least inaugurated; its birthing has begun. Perhaps this is the key. The message of the disciples was not to do this, or do that. It was not the Law that those Jewish folks would have been expecting at the festival ... but the Gospel, the Good News: go out and celebrate what has been done, what is being done ... and join in! A different language for sure!

The problem is that we continually, habitually, look back. We look back to the way things used to be ... the good ol’ days! We deceive ourselves that, somehow, they were wonderful—and, yes, I agree sometimes they were less complicated than our modern lives. But they were not always as good as we might like to think. We as Christians look to the past for wisdom and understanding—our Eucharist reminds of what occurred in the past—but we are people of the future.

The kingdom of God is being inaugurated, it is birthing, we are called to birth it! It is difficult! Today we shall sing a hymn and go out to our own Mount of Olives, where there is doubt, fear, uncertainty. It is our role to bring righteousness, peace, joy in the Spirit. This is our language and it is universal—it doesn’t have to be verbal! Multiculturalism is of God; it doesn’t mean we are all the same—completely the opposite. It is not easy, but we are called to be patient as this great project of God becomes a reality. Pentecost is all about the future, one to which we are called to contribute, today!

Amen.