

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Pentecost

Collect:

God, who at this time taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending them the light of your Holy Spirit: grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in all things and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Please read through these passages slowly and reflectively before reading my sermon.

Acts 2:1-21 Psalm 104: 25-35. 37 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13
John 20:19-23

In writing and reading, speaking and listening, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

I wonder if you have a favourite symbol for the Holy Spirit?

Perhaps the dove, the image from Jesus' baptism when the heavens open and the Spirit descends.

Or perhaps some of the images from today's reading from Acts:

the rushing wind

the tongues of fire

My favourite symbol comes from this passage too, but it is more elusive: it is the experience of a whole crowd of very different people, people of varied language and culture, hearing the same message of God's love for them at the same time. The unity only lasts for a short period, before they begin to interpret what they have experienced differently, but for that period, they are held in a common encounter with God. What is really moving to me about that encounter is that although it is a common experience,

it is not an identical experience “in our own languages we each hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power”.

The Holy Spirit unites the diverse group in an experience they each receive in their own unique way

This multi-lingual revelation of the Holy Spirit is often talked of as a reversal of story in Genesis of the tower of Babel. In that myth (by which I mean a story that shows us a deep timeless truth about our human condition) the men of the earth use the fact that they all speak the same language to co-operate with the goal of overthrowing the supremacy of God by building a tall tower, God thwarts their arrogance by disrupting their ability to communicate with one another and giving them different native tongues.

It’s a story that reminds us of the deep seated tendency in human beings to co-operate when they can see it serves their own interests, but for that soon to break down when their self-interest differs.

We can even begin to see that tendency around us now. Whilst there was a feeling of “all in this together” our society has generally been prepared to face difficult restrictions to stay safe. Now we can begin to see cracks in that unity, fractiousness in the way different leaders are defending themselves and blaming others. Our differences begin to overwhelm the unifying virtues of love and mutuality.

I know in many conversations I have had, as well as from the focus of general debate, that we are all keen to take from this period all that has been good in our community response – people like getting to know their neighbours better, supporting local business, focusing on wellbeing rather than competition; but there is also a “realism” that says things will probably drift back to old patterns sooner than change coming. The social and economic structures we live within easily tend towards the Babel pattern.

The revelation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is a recreation after Babel.

It is not a return to everyone speaking the same language, but a discovery that we can all encounter the power of the living God in our own unique way, held in unity by the Spirit itself.

The Spirit is the unity that offers us the freedom to be most truly ourselves and most truly members of a co-operating community.

This is what St Paul emphasises in his writing on the Holy Spirit in his first letter to the Corinthians in which he is helping them with how it can be that members of the church each have deep and intense responses to Jesus Christ, and feel called their love for God in varied ways can form a beautiful and faithful worshipping community, each valuing the other's gifts and authentic love for God;

“to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”

What brings us closest to God brings us closest to each other through the Spirit working in us all.

That is why the Pentecost revelation of the Holy Spirit is often described as the birthday of the church. Throughout the gospel we have seen how different in character many of the apostles and disciples were: on the day of Pentecost they communicate the love of God they have known in their walk with Jesus with common purpose. Through the book of Acts those who spread the gospel do not always agree, but they return to prayer in the Spirit to come to a common mind, which is sometimes worked out in a division of labour according to the gifts of those involved (Peter primarily evangelising the Jewish community and Paul going to the Gentiles, for example).

This year, especially since Easter, we have had the opportunity, individually, to focus on our own lives of faith. These weekly sermons have suggested ways of looking at where we each

notice God at work in our lives, and how we relate to the risen Jesus. In particular, over the days since Ascension, some of us have explored different ways of praying, ways in which we most naturally open ourselves to the Spirit at work in us. I know many of you have found the space to deepen in personal faith has been a real gift.

The challenge of a period of time when we draw closer to God in our own way, is how we feel about entering fully into the communal life of the church once more. If I have discovered new life in finding God in silence, how will it be when I worship with someone who has rekindled their love of traditional prayers, or has discovered the energy of contemporary worship songs for the first time?

Pentecost is the invitation to trust and discover how what brings us closest to God, brings us closest to each other. It's a time to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to strengthen our communion with one another as we deepen our communion with God even while that is not expressed by gathering at the altar. It is a time to seek guidance out of the world of Babel where we worry about preserving our own self-interest by fighting our corner, into the realm of the Spirit where we notice together how God is using your unique gift and my unique gift for the building of God' reconciled community – which is I don't imagine is a tower – but a group of different people hearing and responding to the love of God together.

Over the next weeks I hope to explore with you ways of gently founding a renewed sense of connection between us on the life in the Spirit that has drawn us together. Let's think about how we might share our life of prayer, perhaps by creating small prayer groups. Let's think about how we shape our lives together according to our gifts and the things we are called to share so that it becomes natural to encourage others to join in.

Responding to the Pentecost invitation to be drawn by the Spirit into God's reconciled people, is not just for ourselves, or for the life of our churches. It is so we can share ways of living in the realm of the Spirit in our wider society: rejecting Babel patterns and building the kind of mutuality that we have seen sparks of in these difficult days.

I have written a piece which will be published on the Exmoor Magazine Facebook page this evening in which a visit to the new Woodside Bridge inspired me reflect on the variety of skills that went into that structure being in place. I used Woodside Bridge as an image for the way we have been building bridges in communities, drawing on so many people's contributions from prayer to shopping and so much in-between. Then I made the link that today we celebrate the Holy Spirit, the ultimate bridge builder. The image of the bridge is perhaps my symbol of the Holy Spirit for this Pentecost.

May the Holy Spirit bridge the gaps between us this Pentecost Sunday and always and guide us to find the God given unity that is created when we celebrate our unique gifts. And may the same Spirit help us to feel connected with those we miss, open our hearts to the bridges others are building to us, and guide us to offer our love and skill to build, with others, the strong and lasting bridges of communal care wherever they are needed now.

Amen