

Pentecost – Celebration and Challenge

St John and St Stephen's Reading

28.05.23

Acts 2:1-15 & John 7:37-39

When the day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.....

Slide 1 – Video clip of Lord's Prayer in many languages

This morning we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised, and the inclusiveness of the gospel. It might seem astonishing to us that the un-learned disciples were suddenly able to speak in other languages. But the real astonishment belongs to those who suddenly heard the good news in their own language. Imagine how surprising and how wonderful that would have been.

Whatever Pentecost was, whether we call it the birthday of the Church, or the coming of the Spirit, it was a celebration. It had a celebratory feel! We know that because it had all the elements of celebration in it. The spontaneity, the joy, the surprise, the sense of something more than 'what normally happens'. Because these Jews had gathered from all across the known world, for the Festival of Pentecost – the end of the 50 days during which the harvest was gathered in.

So they knew what they were coming for – very probably they'd been coming to celebrate the Feast of Weeks for many a long year. They knew what to expect. But this year it turned out to be radically different. And in a way it's nice to turn up for religious worship more or less knowing what to expect. Or is it?!

I'm all for worship that is well prepared and well executed (if that's not an anomalous thing to say) but when the Holy Spirit is blowing through, there's often a sense of not knowing where something is going but being joyfully caught up in it anyway! Maybe we need a bit more of that kind of worship!

Suddenly, at this unusual Pentecost, people who didn't expect to, began hearing their own languages – began to hear the good news. Everyone loves a bit of good news. I wonder what's the best news you've had recently. Passing exams, an engagement, a

new baby, a graduation, a test result that came back clear; getting a new job or house. But imagine if you couldn't get that news because you didn't speak the language. You wouldn't 'get the memo'; you wouldn't get the point; you wouldn't get the blessing.

The delight in the response of the people gathered is obvious: 'And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?' They were expecting to hear the language spoken by Galileans – the language they normally heard at Pentecost; the language of the settled religion of the Jewish people – structured, predictable, comforting.

Instead, they heard Jewish followers of Jesus, with no learning to speak of, proclaiming the gospel in tongues they could understand. To hear something significant in your own language is a powerful thing. It is said 'you cannot be what you cannot see'. Similarly, you can't respond to God's invitation unless you can hear that invitation in your own tongue. The work of the Wycliffe Bible Translators whom I first came across as a student in Reading, attests to the supreme importance of hearing the gospel in your own language.

This has implications for how we approach those neighbours with whom we'd like to share the good news, but whose languages (in the widest sense of the word) we may not speak very well. To some extent each generation or group develops their own language so it might be difficult for us to understand the language of, say, someone in their 20s and the way they speak with peers – even though they're speaking English. This happens when Chris's godson, Matt, comes to stay and he and Kit talk about gaming. I see a completely different side of Kit when he's talking gaming (even though I don't know what any of it means) one where he's fluent, confident, knowledgeable and agile in his field.

The digital generation, born into a world of the internet, use different language to describe how they view the world. They probably do Christianity a different way to most of us here. I considered putting a meme on the slides (memes are one way that Gen Z understand the world and share its idiosyncrasies. So, I did some research on popular memes - and decided I didn't really understand them and would probably look stupid trying to do so - so ask your children and grandchildren about memes – or if you get memes, come and share some with me afterwards.

Continuing on the theme of today's languages, I wonder if there's anyone here who speaks the language of emojis; of Gifs; of Snapchats or of Tik Tok? This week I learnt there aren't many bishops on Tik Tok – and indeed hardly any C of E people communicating to the millions of teens and young adults that use the video app every day for laughs, but also as their main source of news.

The Bishop of Horsham, Ruth Bushyager, however, is on Tik Tok because she wants to speak the language in order to communicate the good news to that audience. Imagine you are a 20-year-old scrolling away one day on your phone, and you come across somebody talking about life with God that you can relate to, that is right there on your phone, that really speaks to you. In that moment, you might experience a modern Pentecost. 'How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?' So, I say good for the Bishop of Horsham.

My daughter let me know the other day that the emoji I was using at the end of my WhatsApp actually suggested something rather different to what I thought it did...which could've been embarrassing had I sent it to someone else. It suddenly made me feel like I hadn't really grasped the language. Misappropriating the language of another group can cause all sorts of problems. But what better way to show that you are interested in someone than to learn their language?

So, Pentecost is a celebration of diversity, whichever way you look at it. And of inclusion. And here's our first challenge: How might we learn the language of the people moving into our parish in the new housing? What are their languages?

When a group of us walked there last week to meet one of the concierges at Huntley Wharf, we began to see that lifestyles are very different in the newbuild parts of Reading. The people moving in are, by and large, young, professional, doing hybrid working, digitally highly literate and mainly still to start a family. How do we find common ground as a church of England congregation with our historic understanding of parish and community? I wonder what the languages required are, and could we learn them? A good place to start will be to listen.

At Pentecost no one needed to learn a new language, of course, because the Holy Spirit gave the disciples miraculous utterances that were understood by all those who were gathered there. And today we're celebrating the fact that the Spirit of God, through those willing disciples, spoke words that gave many the chance to hear good news in their own tongue.

Slides from school

The school had their biannual International Evening on Wednesday. It was one of the most vibrant and inspiring events I've been to in a long time. We had food served from all corners of the globe; we had parents and children writing in their home tongues (using many different alphabets) and we enjoyed 90 minutes of music and dance from children aged 5 upwards. Many different cultures were showcased, and one of the best things was seeing people come alive as they recognised their own tongue, their own culture, being celebrated. It was truly inclusive. And it was universal too – because who can resist a good bit of rhythm and dance? I have two videos of the evening to inspire us, for watching at the end of the service (but please

don't record them). I wanted us to catch a glimpse of something truly joyful and spontaneous.

So, here's the second challenge: What would it mean for us to be a fully multi-cultural congregation where, in our spoken word, delivery, music and events, *White British* was not the dominant culture? How can we work towards this more fully? How might we replicate the energy of that amazing evening at the school? These are things we might like to ponder as we hear from people who speak in other languages and celebrate the wonderful diversity of the people of God and the global reach of the gospel.

We're going to end with our own little Pentecost, with a number of 'tongues' being spoken. For some of the people who are going to come up now and treat us to some other languages, their Christian identity has been formed in their home language and now they're living in a different language and culture. What is that experience like? For others, knowledge of a language other than English has been acquired by travel, work, mission service or simply a desire to connect with a friend or family member who's living somewhere other than the UK.

Invite named people (and anyone else) to come up and read (please say what language you are going to speak and if it's not immediately obvious, where that language comes from).

Slides of flags

Diana - Afrikaans

Adriana – Portuguese

Natalie – French and Spanish

Don (& Katniss?) Mandarin

Antony - Tamil

Rachel – Nepali

Alina and Julie - Ukrainian

Richard C. – Bengali and Latin

Sara Okyere-Darko – Twi (Ghana)

Gabriela – Romanian and Italian

Jose – German

Tobe – Igbo (Nigeria)

Chris A. – Norwegian

Christine - Swedish

Sushila – Hindi?

Kate – Russian?

Anyone else?

(Videos from International Evening – to be shown at the end of the service).