

Sermon Feast of Pentecost Year B 2021

I suspect many of us, many Anglicans at least, come to this feast and to the text placed before us today from the Book of Acts with a degree of nervousness and uncertainty. Perhaps we approach it with a question, an uneasiness. How come our experience of church is so unlike what the story proposes? How come this exuberant, ecstatic experience, this bold proclamation of the good news, this outpouring of the Spirit is so strange and unfamiliar to (most of) us. We are told by some that our experience of church 'should be like' that of Pentecost. To which we might say, there is nothing in reading from Acts which suggests that this is a normative *experience* for the life of the church. Indeed, the record itself suggests that this is a unique event, a distinct moment in the unfolding of salvation history.

So even if not normative for the worship of the church, the great feast we celebrate today certainly *is* crucial to our understanding of the identity and mission of the church. The first little clue that points us to this is the presence of the Blessed Mother in scene described for us today. In the reading today from Acts we are in the opening verses of chapter 2. But in chapter one we are told that with the apostles (less Judas Iscariot), together whose who are known as the 'brothers of the Lord' along 'with certain women' was Mary, the mother of Jesus. Luke, the writer of this book, opens his second volume with reference to the blessed Mother just as he opened his first volume, his gospel, with the presence of the blessed Mother. In the gospel we hear of the *overshadowing* of the Holy Spirit. Today we hear of its *descent*. The work and action and of the Holy Spirit in both bringing something wonderful to birth. The overshadowing of the Spirit at Nazareth leading to the birth of the Son of God. The descent of the Spirit at Jerusalem leading to the birth of Christ's body the church. It is from this insight that such emphasis – as I mentioned last week - is given in the Book of Acts to how the early church *continued* the very ministry of Our Lord: in his works of preaching, of healing, of exorcism, of forgiving sins, even of raising the dead. As readers and hearers of the New Testament we are meant to understand that the *same* Spirit which brought the Lord Christ to birth, and to life from death is the same Spirit now present and empowering the church.

But another clue is given us in the reading from Acts as to how we are to understand our identity and mission. And it comes from Luke simply noting that the event described occurs on the day of Pentecost. We might not fully appreciate that Pentecost

was not a Christian invention. This is an ancient established Jewish feast. The reading today gives us the Greek name, but the Jews know it – even today - as the feast of Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks. Our own Jewish neighbours would have celebrated it last week, 50 days after Passover. It was one of the principal feasts in the Law of Moses. And essentially is a harvest festival, a giving thanks for the fruits of the earth.

And in this we see a profound convergence of ideas. A thanksgiving for the first fruits of the earth might seem somewhat remote from the mystery Christians celebrate today. Of course, almost all ancient peoples one way or another, observed some kind of first fruits/harvest festival. When rural Anglicans celebrated harvest festivals they were really tapping into a pre-Christian memory. To offer up and to give thanks for the first fruits of the earth reminds of precariousness of earlier times, where crops fail, where famine and starvation were a haunting possibility. The feast of first fruits, Pentecost, was an occasion to remember that *the community* was needed for survival. And an occasion to give thanks for mercies given. A heart of gratitude and renewed sense of our need for each other is surely something the church of each age ought remember.

But yet, another idea is brought to bear upon the very name of this feast. The Feast of Weeks, the Feast of First Fruits, is a key platform in the Jewish religious imagination, and by extension the religious imagination of those gathered in that Upper Room. And important, because the idea of harvest, and of the land, and of fruit of the land was surely the particular way the People of God could understand that God had been true to his promises. All that he had said he would do for his people, he had indeed done. That a harvest *could* be gathered, that thanks *could* be given for the fruits of the land, was the sign that God's people stood in the land of Promise, that this was their country. Indeed, the very first memory of themselves as a people, as the children of Abraham, has this idea of the Promised Land at its very heart. Christ, by his resurrection, and the outpouring of the Spirit, leads *the renewed* people of God to their Land of Promise.

To confirm this idea – that the Spirit is the sign of our entrance to the Promised Land – is the second key image that comes from this feast. The first being the descent of the Spirit in tongues of flame. The second being the proclamation of the gospel – the 'marvels of God' – in various languages. On the one hand this is a reversal of Babel. Where once there was confusion and division, now, in the power of the Spirit there is togetherness and understanding. But this too is the sign that we have come to possess a new country: a new language - a universal language - is being spoken. It is the

language of the gospel, of the good news of Jesus Christ. A language which transcends the particularities of culture and place, which crosses every boundary and limitation. A language, even if spoken in many tongues, can be heard and understood by all.

Being brought into a new land, speaking a new language, is what lies behind the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians. This language we now speak, the new country we now inhabit demands of us a new code of conduct: a new law for a new people. We might wonder what was going on in the Galatian church for Paul to extend such a frank warning. If we think we have it bad, well clearly it wasn't much better in the middle of the first century! And Paul addressing issues which clearly he had had to address before: *I warn you now as I warned you before, those who behave like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.* Sometimes the old language is hard to forget. Sometimes we pine for the old country.

So, Paul then, proposes the signs - the markers – that we have 'crossed over', that we have had our passports stamped, and are learning from the phrase book of this new country, our Promised Land: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness self-control. The fruits of the Spirit. These are to be the fruits of our harvest, the signs that we have indeed made our home in the land of promise. A fruitful life of love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control surely has immense power to commend itself to others. A life which shows we inhabit a different country.

Saint Augustine said that *God is the country of the soul.* God is to be our country, our environment, the air we breathe. And it is this profound truth we celebrate on this feast today: God calling us and equipping us to inhabit his Land of Promise. The saintly Michael Ramsay was 100th archbishop of Canterbury. In his classic 'The Christian Priest Today' (compulsory reading for a previous generation of clerics) he said, *that much of the present obsession of our church with doubts, uncertainties, negatives, loss of nerve is due to a failure as a church to live with God as the country of the soul. In that country we face problems with integrity, but we also share in the joy of the saints.* In the outpouring the Spirit of God in the Upper Room, not only is something new being brought to birth, not only are the disciples equipped to continue Christ's work, not only is this a sign of God's abundance and of his grace. It is also the sign that the renewed People of God have now entered their Promised Land; that *we* have entered our Promised Land. We must – all of us – learn *to inhabit* this new country. *God is the country of the soul.* We must learn its language and its peculiar ways. Amen.