

# *becoming pentecost people*

a sermon preached on the

*day of pentecost*

9 June 2019

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Acts 2: 1-21; Genesis 11: 1-9; Psalm 104; Romans 8: 14-17; John 14:8-17

One of the delights of walking in rural Spain was the communication with the local people. They were often old men, sitting outside in the sun, or wandering through the village. On seeing people who were obviously not local they would call out, *Buen Camino*, good journey. Sometimes they would begin to talk, either in Castilian Spanish or in a Galician dialect. It made no difference to me because I don't speak either of those languages but that was one of the delights of the experience, because having no shared language didn't stop them at all.

The first few times this happened I would say my one real phrase of Spanish, *I'm sorry, I don't speak Spanish*. Sometimes that would provoke laughter, but more often, they would nod enthusiastically and continue to talk.

Initially I felt a responsibility to attempt to let my interlocutor know that I couldn't understand. However, after a few encounters, I let go of the need for either of us to understand the details of what was being said, and simply entered into the spirit of the dialogue, responding with English or a bit of French as the occasion seemed to demand. It was fun!

I couldn't really describe these exchanges as conversations, but they were certainly rich and enjoyable communication. Sometimes I could guess the topic we were discussing from the context, but at other times I simply made a guess and responded with comments on the beauty of the view, the unseasonably mild weather we had been having, the fatness and sleekness of the local pigs, and speculations regarding the best place to buy local cheese and bread, and the café where one should stop for a warming bowl of soup.

I really have no idea of the content of these conversations, but I do know that they left a deep sense of true communication on things of importance. I walked on feeling that I had connected with warmth, sincerity, openness and good will, with another human being, very different from myself. There are, after all, many kinds of communication that don't need words.

Today we are celebrating Pentecost. For us, as Christians, it is the day when we remember God's gift to us of the Holy Spirit, marked by an extraordinary opening up of communication between people of all kinds. However, there is another celebration that occurs today and that adds richness and meaning to our own. It is the ancient feast of Shavuot.

Originally, Shavuot was an agricultural festival, a celebration of the gathering in of the grain, but by the time of Jesus, Shavuot had become a celebration of God's giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. This was a significant moment in the history of Israel when they entered into a covenant with God and understood themselves as God's chosen people.

These Jewish celebrations were the reason why so many people from all over the world were in Jerusalem at the time of Pentecost, and the community of Jesus' disciples would have been immersed

in all these layers of meaning. Jesus gathers his disciples in like the grain from the harvest, and they are given, not an identity that comes from a law written on tablets of stone, but an identity that comes from God's Holy Spirit, poured into their hearts.

The Spirit comes with a sound like the rush of a violent wind and with tongues of fire resting on the disciples. They are swept up, consumed by the power of God, and they begin to speak. And the amazing thing about their speech is that it can be understood by everyone around them. People from all over the known world who were in Jerusalem at the time gather around them and are amazed to hear uneducated Galileans giving a message that they can understand. At Pentecost, all people become God's people.

I imagine that this was just as startling to the disciples as it was to the crowd! Some, of course, sneered at them and assumed that they were drunk. (Sadly, there are always people who cannot accept God, even when God is at work right in front of them.) But Peter, who so often gets things wrong, suddenly understands what is happening. *No!* he says, *this is not drunkenness. This is what was spoken through the prophet Joel. This is God pouring out God's Spirit upon all flesh. This is the stuff of prophesy, dreams and visions* (Adapted from Acts 2:16-17)

In that moment Peter understands that, through the Holy Spirit, he and the other disciples can communicate to all sorts of people to whom they had never before imagined speaking! What they have to say about Jesus can be communicated to every human being on earth. It doesn't matter who they are, or where they come from, God's Holy Spirit is a Spirit of communication who overcomes barriers and draws people into relationship with God and with each other, adopts us and makes us children of God.

We also heard today the story of the Tower of Babel; a story of a time when all the people of the world shared the same language. Together they decide to build a tower that will reach up into the heavens to; *make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the whole face of the earth* (Gen 11:4). Those people are not focussed on finding their identity through their relationship with God. Instead, they think that they can achieve identity through their own endeavours. As a result, the story tells us, God divides them by destroying their communication, undoing their language and splitting it into many different tongues.

At Pentecost, Babel is reversed. These uneducated Galileans can do nothing through their own endeavours. They no longer have Jesus with them, they are afraid and powerless and yet, through the power of God's Spirit they are adopted as God's children and they are given the ability to communicate. What they communicate is a message of hope and identity for all people.

This message is fundamental to the way in which we as Christians understand the nature of the God who we worship. God communicates, God makes connections. God is, in God's self, loving relationship, connection and communication.

It is the Holy Spirit who connects us with Jesus, and through Jesus to God who adopts us as God's children. It is the Holy Spirit that helps us to communicate to God in prayer, particularly when words fail us and all we can do is cry to God. At those times, *the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words* (Rom 8:26).

The Holy Spirit seeks to bring us into relationship with God and with each other. This is our role as Pentecost people, adopted by God's Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us to communicate; to share good news with one another. But the Holy Spirit is not just a gift given to people who go to church. The story of Pentecost tells us that God's message of hope, love and identity was poured out for all people to understand. Just as the first disciples spoke this message to those around them, we are called to take the good news of God's love into environments that are strange and unfamiliar to us.

This is not easy. In fact, it is not something we can do in our own power. Communication is complex. Like the people at Babel, it can sometimes feel that, despite a shared language and culture, even a shared family, it is impossible to communicate with some people. This is a painful and lonely experience. On the other hand, it is possible, as I found in Spain, to experience the spirit of willingness to communicate that overcomes all barriers between people.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes to the church to enable us to build bridges with strangers; to speak words that build relationship, not just with people like us, but with people who are fundamentally not like us. If we try to do this in our own strength and wisdom, we will re-create Babel. Instead we need to be Pentecost people. People who are shaped by the fruits of the Holy Spirit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23).

As we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit this Pentecost may we pray;

- that God's Holy Spirit will draw us into a family relationship with people with whom we had never previously been able to imagine being in communication
- that the Holy Spirit will give us a new identity based, not on our preferences or our established sense of who we are but based on God, and,
- may we pray that as God draws us together, like grains at the harvest, though we are many, we may, through the self-giving love of God, become one bread and offer to all humanity the nourishment of the love of God.

The Lord be with you.