

Sermon for Pentecost Sunday (31 May 2009)

Today we celebrate Pentecost – the day when Jesus’ disciples experienced the arrival of the Holy Spirit in their lives individually and together. In America when people go to church on Pentecost Sunday they often wear something red. Who’s wearing red among you? We have red in other parts of our church too – the altar frontal, the pulpit frontal. Nick is wearing a red robe too; I’m not allowed to wear a stole because I’m not ordained yet but I thought I’d wear my red scarf instead.

Why do we choose the colour red? What does it remind us of? There’s a clue in our first reading, when we heard about how the disciples were all together in the same house (Acts 2.1-13). Suddenly there was a sound like the rushing of a strong wind and tongues of fire appeared and touched each one of them. I wonder what it looked like? When some of you arrived in church this morning you were each given a ‘tongue of fire’ - could you hold it up above your head now? So, look around, do you think this is what the disciples saw? I doubt it, somehow, none of you look terribly surprised or excited to have a tongue of fire resting on you! For the disciples on that first day of Pentecost, it must have been an astonishing experience as they found themselves touched and filled by the Holy Spirit, who appeared to them like tongues of flame. So we wear red in church today to remind us of the colour of flames, the colour of those tongues of fire.

But even if you didn’t come to church wearing something red today, you all brought something else that is mentioned in the same reading. You brought your tongues – and this is the moment when you have my permission to check that you did bring your tongue today by sticking it out at me and then putting it back safely inside your mouth – just once! You need to look after your tongue carefully and treat it with respect because it’s a very important part of your body. Without it, we wouldn’t be able to form sounds, or to speak so that others can hear us, or sing praise to God. When we can’t get our words out we sometimes say we’re *tongue-tied*. And we sometimes talk about being able to speak in *other* tongues, or other languages. Some languages even use the same word for ‘tongue’ and for ‘language’; in French it’s the word ‘LANGUE’, and in Russian it’s the word ‘_____’. So tongues and languages are all tied up together. And we can see from our first reading that tongues and languages were all tied together on that first day of Pentecost too.

After being touched by the tongues of fire, the disciples went outside into the streets of Jerusalem and mingled with the crowds. At that time Jerusalem was a bit like London today, or even Cambridge. It was a city where people from many

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different countries lived, or came for a visit, and each person spoke the language of his or her country. So it was a bit like walking down King's Parade and hearing lots of different languages spoken, some of which you might understand, but others with which are completely unfamiliar. The reading from Acts gives us a long list of the languages you could hear spoken in the streets of Jerusalem: the languages of Parthians, Medes and Elamites, of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, of Pontus and Asia, of Phrygia and Pamphylia; people who came from Egypt spoke Arabic, those from Rome spoke Latin. With so many languages, it wasn't easy to understand what everyone was saying. I brought some languages on cards along today to show you how tricky it could be if you lived in or visited Jerusalem. Can anybody tell me what this card says? No? How about this one? OK, let's try these again later.

But something very remarkable happened on that first day of Pentecost. When the disciples went out into the streets of Jerusalem and mingled with the crowds, they began to talk about what God had done in their lives, about their friends Jesus, about his life and work, his death and resurrection. The disciples had a fiery enthusiasm and a fresh inspiration to share the good news of God's love for the world. And as they did so, the people around them began to hear the good news of God's love in their own languages. People were amazed and puzzled at what was going on. 'Listen to what these guys are saying', they said. 'How come ordinary men from Galilee are able to speak to us in our own language about God's power at work in our world?' Some people thought the disciples were just mad or drunk. But other people were more thoughtful and asked 'What does this mean?' 'What should we do in response?'

I expect the disciples were just as surprised and shocked at what happened in Jerusalem on that exciting day as their listeners were. But perhaps when things quietened down, they remembered what Jesus had told them the night before he died. Jesus words are recorded for us in today's gospel reading (John 15.26-27; 16.4b-15). On that evening, while they were all having supper together in the Upper Room, Jesus tried to explain to his disciples that he would have to leave them soon and go away, back to his Father; but he promised to send someone else to be with them. He promised to send the Spirit of truth – the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter, the Bible uses different names. And Jesus promised that when the Spirit of truth came, he would do 3 important things:

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First, Jesus said, the Spirit of truth will help you understand God's plans for this world; he will help you understand right from wrong. He will touch your minds and remind you of all that I have taught you while I've been with you. (*Touch head*)

Second, Jesus said, even though I'm no longer with you in the flesh, the Spirit of truth will help you feel my presence with you; even though you can't see me with your eyes, he will help you to hear my voice in your heart. (*Touch heart*)

And thirdly, Jesus said, the Spirit of truth will help you live out your lives as my friends and followers; he will help you tell others about me, share my love, live together as my church, changing the world around you to make it better, to make it more like the world my Father and I long for it to be. Jesus promised that the power that had been at work in his own life – the power that was to bring him back to life from the dead – would continue to be at work through his Holy Spirit in his body the church. (*Open hands*)

So today, just as it was for Jesus' disciples at that Pentecost, God's Holy Spirit is still with us and comes to fill each one of us. His Spirit of truth: 1) helps us remember and understand Jesus' teachings in our minds (*head*); 2) helps us feel his presence with us in our hearts (*heart*); 3) helps us to belong to his church here in Chesterton and to carry the light and love of Christ into our world (*hands*).

We can't do any of that by ourselves, on our own. We can't even do it together, as a group. We can only do it if we ask for the Holy Spirit's help, today and every day. And when Roseanna, Florence and Alex join with us at the communion table for the first time today, that's one of the things they will be doing. And when Jim, Richard, Julia, Susan and Jean are confirmed on Wednesday evening, that's exactly what they will be doing: making their own commitment to follow Christ, and asking the Holy Spirit to be at work in their lives – helping them remember and understand Jesus' words in their minds; helping them feel his presence in their hearts; helping them belong to his church here in Chesterton and to carry the light and love of Christ into our world.

So there's a great deal for us to celebrate together today and I think we should do so by returning to those 'tongues' or 'languages' on the cards that we had trouble understanding earlier. You shouldn't have any trouble understanding what this says (*card in English*). So now perhaps you can tell me what this means? And this? And this?

God's Spirit is indeed with us today. Alleluia. Amen.