

Sermon for Pentecost 2018

Acts 2:1-21

The disciples were all gathered together with the mother of Jesus and his brothers. Then all these people from places with odd names came and joined them: Phrygia, Pamphylia and Cappadocia. And then after the rushing wind and the tongues of fire that came and settled on their heads, the disciples started to talk in ways that could be understood by all the different people who were present there, who spoke a variety of languages, so that the disciples seemed to each person to be speaking to them in their own language.

Once upon a time I went to Brussels to watch a select committee of the EU Parliament at work. They were discussing something about the insurance of oil rigs and tankers. As some of you will know I used to be a marine underwriter and then a maritime lawyer, so I could appreciate the finer points. It was in a room which was a bit like a theatre, with a big table on a raised dais for the committee members to sit at, surrounded by rows of seats for the audience, each one with a small table fitted to the chair with a set of headphones and buttons to control them.

You were invited to put the headphones on and select the language in which you wanted to listen to the discussion. The MEPs were pretty good at speaking in a variety of languages; even the British ones managed pretty good French and German from time to time. But I had the headphones on, and I was listening in English. I was plugged into the simultaneous translation into English which was provided by the translators sitting in glass booths around the outside of the room. So far as I know, all the languages in the EU used by the 27 member nations - sorry, I mean 28 - were being translated, one into another, simultaneously. It's an incredible piece of work. The translators are really good.

We are told, in the story in the Acts of the Apostles, that the disciples spoke in such a way that those who heard them could understand them without the need for translation. They spoke in everyone's language, whatever their native language was. I have absolutely no idea how that could possibly have been done. It was miraculous.

It's a very familiar story, although it is still a hugely remarkable one. Those events at Pentecost are said to be the birthday of the church. These apparently supernatural powers appeared, and the gospel started to spread throughout the world.

Thinking about the gospel spreading round the world, I had a rather unworthy thought that the Pentecost narrative might actually be not very British. You know that there is a very strong thread in British Christianity which likes to think that the Holy Land is somehow transposed over here. 'And did those feet in ancient time | walk upon England's green and pleasant land?'

Englishmen, notoriously, can't speak other languages. It may be that our children are doing it better than we did, but there is still a feeling that, if foreigners don't understand us, all we need to do is to speak English a little bit louder. We certainly do benefit from simultaneous translation but we are not that good at doing it. I have got away with using my O-level French and German for the last 50-odd years, but when it comes to the crunch, if there is anything serious, then I gratefully accept that my German or French colleagues speak English much better than I speak German or French.

I know that there are some people who reckon to 'speak in tongues'. They go into some kind of trance when they attend certain types of church service. Indeed those churches are often called 'Pentecostal' churches. But still, in the back of my mind, I do have a little doubt whether the full Pentecostal 'Monty',

speaking in tongues and waving your arms about, really chimes with that many people in England.

I'm tempted to say that a lot of those mass Pentecostal events, congregations in industrial warehouses shouting 'amen' and raising their arms in unison, reflect not so much the worship of the divine but some collective hysteria, perhaps whipped up by some Billy Graham-like figure. Who knows? But I do wonder whether it's really British.

When I wrote that, I hadn't watched the royal wedding, as I did yesterday. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's sermon was wonderful - but it certainly wasn't the ten minutes of fairly cerebral disquisition on the theology of marriage that you might have expected from a Primate in the Anglican church. Bishop Michael just went in straight to the heart of it. Princess Di's sister had read a lesson from the Song of Solomon - 'set a seal upon my heart.' It was all about love, the power of love. Then the preaching started. Bishop Michael showed passion: he used repetition, repetition for emphasis: economy of style: his message was in your face. And then it was followed by a black church gospel choir. There's nothing for it; it was truly Pentecostal, even if the royal party didn't quite wave their arms about.

Perhaps another way of looking at this, though, is to ask what Pentecost is for. How are we supposed to react now to those events 2000 years ago, to what happened to the disciples and to the people from Phrygia and Pamphylia? What would you feel if, suddenly as we sat here, in St Mary's, our hair caught fire and, instead of one or two select classical allusions, I was speaking to you simultaneously in Yoruba, Serbo-Croat and Welsh, of course as well as in English?

What would you make of it? What if, having seen the extraordinary firework display, the most you could say was, 'Cor,

fancy that!', just expressing some vague astonishment? If that's all it meant, it's surely highly unlikely that we would still be celebrating Pentecost 2000 years later, as Christians, all around the world.

But we are still celebrating Pentecost. So why? What has given the story such long legs? When you listened to Presiding Bishop Michael Curry yesterday, (although of course his sermon was addressed to the Prince and his new Princess), he could have been giving the answers that we're looking for here as well. Power: love: fire. Those were his key words to Harry and Meghan. And they are also the hallmarks of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Power. The force of the rushing wind. Fire. The tongues of fire. And love. Jesus' great commandment. Love, love one another. But look what the power of the Holy Spirit did. It gave the disciples power, capability to speak so that their message could be understood by all people. How important in promoting love that was.

Look at how we notice, today, in various contexts, how people are different from us, not like us, and how that sense of difference can make life difficult. For instance, why are we so uneasy about immigrants? All the rational considerations show that they are really beneficial and useful to us. But - but they are different. They look different, perhaps, as well. Speak a different language.

The Greeks of Jesus' time called strangers βάρβαροι, barbarians - and one version of the etymology of that word was that strangers would speak in a funny way: they sounded as though they were saying 'ba, ba, ba,' a sort of animal grunting. That's it. That might be the problem with immigrants. You know, you might not want animal grunters living next door to you.

But what if you could understand them, and they could understand you, perfectly, as if both of you had grown up in the same street? You wouldn't have any prejudices against them. They wouldn't be barbarians, barbarians at the gate. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch even to love them. Certainly you could love them, if to love them means not to fall in love with them and get married, but simply to care for them, to look out for them and be generous to them. If you speak the same language, you're half-way there.

If you speak the same language, literally or metaphorically, it's much more difficult to think of other people as being different, not like us. If we're not different, we can see all the things we have in common. We won't want some people, (who are just like us underneath), to starve while others, who also are just like us underneath, are homeless or refugees, risking their lives in overloaded boats in the Mediterranean, say. They're just like us. That ability, for the disciples to speak in everyone's language, was the power of love.

So what is Pentecost about, for us, today? It is, as Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said, all about the power of love. I can't resist reading you some of his words from yesterday.

He said:

Think and imagine a world where love is the way.

When love is the way, poverty will become history.

When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary.

When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more.

When love is the way, there's plenty good room - plenty good room - for all of God's children. 'Cos when love is the way, we actually treat each other, well... like we are actually family.

*When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all,
and we are brothers and sisters, children of God.*

*My brothers and sisters, that's a new heaven, a new earth, a new
world, a new human family.*

*And let me tell you something, old Solomon was right in the Old
Testament: that's fire. [Michael B. Curry, found at
<https://tinyurl.com/y96c2z6e>]*

Power, love, fire. Pentecost.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant