

Reflection for Pentecost 2020 Revd Steph Nadarajah

God speaks to us, through the Spirit, in a language we can understand.

My earliest memories of Pentecost come with a measure of fear and terror, not unlike the fear and terror of the disciples who were gathered in a locked room that day. I started reading at church when I was about seven and, let's face it, no-one wants to be on the rota that day. The reading from Acts is a tongue-twister, if ever there was one...all those different countries, all those languages. The only real occasion on which the New Testament gives the Old a run for its money, in terms of pronounceability.

Fortunately, it wasn't enough to put me off reading, or going to church. In fact, my adult faith can very much be traced back to a childhood sense of awe and wonder: an intuitive sense of the sacred mysteries that took hold of my heart and never really let go. I know, now, that God was speaking to me then in a language I could understand.

The day of Pentecost is one of those big moments in the church's year. It's a day that calls for some thumping hymns and all age worship that engages the senses. It's a day on which the inside of the church would be overflowing with red, the flowers would be suitably majestic, candles alight, and there'd definitely be cake. It's a day on which we attempt to convey something of the awesome, fiery, breathy, intangible third person of the Trinity and we do so in symbol and colour because, when speaking about the Spirit, words are bound to fail us.

But perhaps the life that the Spirit brings is easier to identify than it might have been just a few months ago. Though our church buildings are closed, God's effervescent life ripples through God's people and takes hold in homes, streets and communities, where people are loving their neighbours, putting the needs of others before their own, risking their own lives on the front line for the most vulnerable. In the absence of physical presence and gestures, love has become an active word again. And, removed from our altars, pulpits, sanctuaries and vestments, we find ourselves liberated from hierarchical modes of being and doing and speaking in a language that other people can understand, through media like this. We welcome many more worshippers, but we also accept that those new additions may be worshipping in several other, different places. We can neither predict nor inhibit the impact this might have on us, whenever we return to our buildings. But we can be certain that we can never go back to what was normal before.

And all of this exposes the tension at the heart of Pentecost. Why do we pray for, wait for, long for, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit when the Holy Spirit is already alive and active now, today, in our communities?

You may recall that it's a tension that Paul alluded to last week, when he compared Pentecost to an annual whisky festival (one of his unscripted moments of genius - if

you missed it, you'll have to go back and watch it). Why do we have to wait for the Spirit, when the Bible tells us that, in the beginning, the Spirit brooded over the waters of creation? Why do we have to wait for the Spirit when the Bible tells us that the Spirit is God's gift to us in baptism? Why and what are we praying for today?

In the Pentecost service that took place at 9am, Pope Francis described a world that's experiencing a tragic famine of hope, and he also spoke about the other pandemics - those of hunger, war, contempt for life and indifference to others. We look at Missouri and we see devastating and deplorable racial inequalities and the all too frequent killings of black Americans. We look around us at home and we see the impact of the pandemic on those who were already poor and marginalised: household costs are higher, home-schooling is unmanageable, digital exclusion cuts people off, and mental health is deteriorating. And, in all of this, we seek the kind of politics that will put compassion, transparency and moral integrity at its heart. Today, we implore the Holy Spirit to shake things up with reckless abandon, and to bring divine life, love and promise to bear on the narrative of poverty, injustice and exclusion.

'Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done.' The words trip off our tongue every time we say the Lord's Prayer and it's easy to forget that we are meant to be part of the coming of God's Kingdom. We are meant to be part of the shaking up process. Today isn't about nurturing, at any great length, warm fuzzy spiritual feelings, but about being filled and fired up to speak God's language in a way that people understand. In the reading from Acts, the description of the giving of the Holy Spirit takes just four verses, while the response of the disciples takes the rest of the chapter.

The language that the world needs to hear us speaking in is the language of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control....and, of course, the forgiveness that Jesus came speaking to those who'd deserted and betrayed him, after his resurrection. I was praying with my three year old daughter Georgina a couple of nights ago, that we might ask Jesus to come and live in us, and to fill us with his Spirit. 'We want Jesus to live in us?' she said. 'Yes', I said, confidently. 'When Jesus lives in us, does he give us kindness and love?' 'Yes', I said, proudly. And then there was one of those pregnant pauses. 'So, who gives us naughtiness then?' Now there's a conversation for another day....

Those childhood experiences of mine, of awe and wonder, have led to a lifelong relationship with God the Holy Trinity for over thirty years. And, although God has - at times - spoken to me in a language I have understood, I can't say it's always been the case. But I've got to know the Holy Spirit pretty well - the inner movements of intuition and gut instinct; the gift of the right words at the right time; the courage to bear witness to my faith in difficult places. And, always, the breaking down of the barriers of my own creation, in order to enlarge my capacity for love.

So, if today you hear God speaking to you in a language you understand, rejoice. But if today you find words to speak forgiveness and peace to someone who needs it, even better. Either way, today calls for a response: and the transformation of the world depends on it.

Come, Holy Spirit,
fill the hearts of your faithful people,
and kindle in us the fire of your love.
Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created,
and we shall renew the face of the earth.

Amen.