

St Mark's 19th May 2024: Pentecost Sunday

Sermon: Acts 2: 1-21

As with so many other words in the language of the church, that word Pentecost carries a lot of baggage. Things we've been told, assumptions we make, even perhaps doubts we have. So to get us started, a few thoughts on what Pentecost is not.

Pentecost is *not* about speaking in tongues. I used to assume I was *doing* Christianity wrong because I have never spoken in tongues, I've only once in my life heard someone else do this, and it made me feel massively uncomfortable. The reality is, in the Methodist church, speaking in tongues is not a big part of our tradition, so it's no surprise many of us are left a little confused by what it is, what it sounds like, why some do it and others don't, whether we should be doing it, who gets to translate it, whether God like to hear it, whether we as Methodists are too constrained in our worship, too formulaic, and not able to let the spirit in. Let's face it, even a hand in the air in worship is too much for some. We sit down, we only stand when asked, we do as we're told in worship and that suits many of us. By contrast, the Pentecostal church, has a great emphasis on glossolalia, the technical word for speaking in tongues as the spirit prompts, and allows for greater freedom in moving bodies, in the exuberance of shouting out an 'amen' or 'halleluiah'. We don't tend to do that here...and that's ok. It's not better or worse, it's just different.

But I would suggest that if we say Pentecost is about speaking in tongues, we're missing the point.

Pentecost is *not* about the arrival of the Holy Spirit. She's been around from time immemorial. She was there from the very start, breathing life and energy into all of creation. Pentecost is not the birth of the Holy Spirit as if she's a new thing. Or as if after creation, the Holy Spirit returned to the heavens to wait until the Day of Pentecost to descend back to earth, as if there's been a gap of her presence for many thousand's of years.

You may have noticed the pronouns I give the Holy Spirit, and for some of you that may feel uncomfortable. It should go without saying, the Holy Spirit isn't female, but until we stop using male pronouns for God, and we do this liberally, throughout our liturgies and hymns and scripture and prayers, and most of the time we don't notice because it's normative, it's how we've always referred to God; until we stop doing this, I want to draw in the feminine to the Godhead, because without it, it is absent. Without it, we refer to every aspect of the Trinity as 'he'. The Holy Spirit: she likes diversity.

Identity politics has become hugely controversial and divisive, and without heading down a rabbit hole, the one thing I will say is how clumsy the English language is. For those who don't identify as either male or female, as we each has aspects of our

personalities which reflect both genders, some people wish to be referred to as 'they' or 'them', and that is problematic in English because they/them is plural. Unlike German, we don't have gender-neutral pronouns, and so for those who are non-binary, they/them is their only option. Now, when we refer to God as 'they', we risk assumptions of multiple gods, of polytheism, many gods, rather than monotheism, one God, which, again, without falling down another rabbit hole, is not what the Trinity is. I wish we could refer to God and the Holy Spirit as gender-neutral, but we're working with what we've got and I don't think any of us would want the Holy Spirit to be referred to as an inanimate 'it'. And until our language evolves, as our language always has and always will, I will stubbornly refer to the Holy Spirit as she, for there is good biblical precedent for this. Feel free to challenge me later on that.

Pentecost is not about us still waiting for the Holy Spirit. If we're hoping for a revival event in which the Holy Spirit will once again descend in a one-off moment, that's not the message of Pentecost. Pentecost is an event we participate in, not one we wait for. Every God-moment is Pentecost. Every time we are changed, that's Pentecost. Every time we share God's love, that's Pentecost. We are all Pentecostals because the Holy Spirit is in each one of us, coaxing us to speak, to speak up, to share in the mission Jesus left, to take good news with us wherever we go.

Pentecost is not the birthday of the church. Sorry if this pulls the rug from under you, because we've all heard that phrase. I know I've used it in the past. But we come from a long tradition of a community of faith. The concept of the church, even if it wasn't given that name, pre-dates Christianity. A gathering of God's people in worship has been happening for millennia. Plus, the apostles had already established themselves in something like house churches before Pentecost. So, instead of being the day when the church started, Pentecost is when the apostles of the church take seriously the mission Jesus has given them, to keep the rumour of Jesus alive in whispers and witness, in preaching and practice.

The technical word when speaking about the church is, ecclesiology. The Greek word, ecclesia just means an assembly, or gathering. The word "church" has a complicated history and doesn't seem to come from that Greek word, ecclesia. It is possibly derived from Old English which in turn came from a Germanic word which is likely to be derived from a different Greek word meaning "of the Lord." But some scholars dispute this, saying that our English word comes instead from the Anglo-Saxon "Kirke." You might recognise that word from how some in Scotland refer to kirks rather than churches, and this in turn comes from the Latin "circus", meaning "circle" or "ring" because those who came together gathered in a circle.

I quite like the idea of the church being like a circus, held in a circle, and here I think we're closer to what Pentecost *is*. An unbreakable circle with Jesus at the centre, and where we are witness to extraordinary things.

The church, as we keep saying, isn't the building, it's the people. And we see on this First Day of Pentecost, the church emerging out of the shadows, out from behind their fear, out of their fortresses. The history of God's people is nomadic, of pitching up tents, like travellers today who arrive in town with the circus.

What is it like for us to pitch a tent; something temporary, but a space which gathers people in, to experience a sense of wonder whilst gathered in a circle.

The early church had that temporary nature about it. It was moving, transitory, going into new communities as a guest not a host. The church is like a circus tent, interrupting and disturbing, in which the fire of the Holy Spirit breathes down, and then sends people out to chatter and share what they have witnessed. The Holy Spirit is like the acrobat, death-defying, contorting into new shapes not seen before, freed from frailty and inhibition. The church as a circus tells barely believable stories, demonstrates the dramatic, opens the tent flaps and says, come and see. The church as a circus tent allows for space for anyone, space for everyone, and through it the Holy Spirit bends reality and turns it upside down, communicating beyond words, shows us what seems impossible is possible, that people can change, they can be transformed and redeemed.

The church as a circus tent shouldn't take itself too seriously, should embrace the ridiculous, should trust that walking that tightrope of faith requires commitment and risk.

Those apostles staggered around, people thought them drunk, they were an exhibition and drew in the crowd who like circusgoers were amazed and perplexed.

God holds us all encircling us with love. We gather together as a church, as a circle, because we continue to share those incredible stories, we continue to hear words spoken as if for the first time, we continue speak about the death-defying nature of Jesus, the new shapes the Holy Spirit takes within us, we continue to seek transformation and redemption even though they involve commitment and risk, we continue to budge up and make room for more for them to witness and wonder. And when we've done all these things, the Holy Spirit asks us to step out, to step out of our fear, out of the fortresses we have created, to take the risk of sharing the experience and the story.

But what we can never do is step outside that circle of God's love which will always provide the safety net to risks we take in proclaiming the gospel. For this is Pentecost. Amen

Rev'd Rachel Leather