

Pentecost, Year C, 2022

Genesis 11.1-9, Psalm 104.25-end, Acts 2.1-21, John 14.8-17

The giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost evokes a question in those who witness the effect it has on those who have received her. The question is a straightforward one. “What does this mean?” The question is asked by many, but not all, who experience the effect the giving the Holy Spirit has on those who receive her at Pentecost. These witnesses are driven into the streets of Jerusalem (the city of peace that knows no peace), where they begin to speak to those who have come to Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost (shavout) in languages peculiar to the regions from the which they come. What are those who have received the Holy Spirit speaking about? They are speaking about God’s deeds of power. They understand what the Galileans are talking about, they too are believers that is why they are in Jerusalem, but the question remains, ‘What does it mean? Who will give the interpretation? Peter does. He stands up, addresses the crowds beginning by taking up the observation made by some that those who are filled with the Spirit are drunk with new wine. New wine is known as Federweisser in some parts of the German speaking world, but also as Bitzler, Bremser, Krätzer, Neuer Süßer, Neuer Wein, Sauser, Suser, Sturm, Traubenmost.

Surprisingly the image is a good one, because it is an image of being filled with the Holy Spirit to overflowing. God is a generous God. It isn’t a little Holy Spirit here and a little Holy Spirit there, but rather it is a filling up and even an overflowing with the Holy Spirit reminiscent of the water flowing out of the temple in Ezekiel’s vision (chapter 47). The Holy Spirit floods the river banks bringing life to those who receive her. To appreciate this image one needs to think of the annual flooding of the Nile river in ancient times. The Holy Spirit will not be held back. She will break convention driving those who receive her

into the streets of the world as they overcome their fears. The narrowness of the mission of Israel is to be broadened, which was always God's intention, when he set aside a people for his own. Again God's Holy Spirit drives those who receive her into the streets of Jerusalem and into the regions of the world to proclaim the mighty acts of God.

What kind of Spirit is this? It is the Spirit of prophecy. I don't mean a spirit of divination or the like, but the Spirit of being empowered to interpret God's activity in the world; seeing it, naming it, and claiming it. Not only here, not only throughout the Book of Acts, but also down the centuries arriving at this present day and this present moment. In words from the Book of Revelation (3.22), 'Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.'

Reminded of and emboldened by this first Pentecost we are to spill out into the streets of Vienna, into the wards, offices, pubs, factories, relationships, families, clubs where people meet to proclaim in word and deeds the mighty acts of God and the effect they are having on us as God's people as God calls us into his kingdom. Hopefully with the effect that people might ask us, 'What does this mean?' There is no doubt that the giving of the Holy Spirit empowers those who receive her to interpret God's mighty acts then and today. We know that this was for some at great cost to themselves, as we remember Stephen, James, Peter and Paul to name some of the better known exemplars of the faith.

Well, last Saturday we held a street party literally spilling onto a section of the Jaurésgasse closed for the day with the permission of the civic magistrate. It was a wonderful day and again congratulations to everyone who participated, each contributing as best as they were able. In words from the end of the

second chapter of Acts we emulated something of this empowering, 'All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.' Imperfectly yes, but inspired by... People worked well together. People renewed friendships. The atmosphere was tremendous. People who did not know the church became aware of it. The benefits were many, but a lot of work and meticulous organisation was required, which made the day run smoothly. It was a day to build on.

Let me now tell you about my disquiet. My disquiet was with the bunting draped along the church. What were we signalling? I looked at these flags as a watchman which is part of the priestly ministry. A good number of the flags belong to nations that suppress the Christian faith and/or persecute Christians. These are not our values. China would be a prime example, but there are others. This disturbed me and disturbs me. Each time I went to church or passed by it, I had to think about the values that many of these nation states promote, which are contrary to the values of the Christian faith as well as the disarray of the public discourse in most of these nation states.

During the activities the Anglican Communion flag was flying from the church mast pole above all these other flags. The main emblem is that of a mariner's compass on a blue background, in the shape of a compass rose pointing to all the corners of the earth. At the centre is the cross reminiscent of St George's flag symbolising one assumes the origins in England of the Anglican Communion, this global fellowship/communion of churches. In a circle within the compass rose we read in Greek a Bible text, 'The truth will set you free.' (John 8:32) The truth that Jesus is both Lord and Messiah, as Peter exclaims later in his speech on the first day of Pentecost to those who have heard Galileans, simple folk, speak to them in their own languages. Paul's message

in the very last verse of the Book of Acts connects with Peter's making an arch that binds them to one another. It is the same message. It is an apostolic message. The author of Acts writes,

'Paul lived in Rome for two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.' (Acts 28.30)

Nation states are transitory. They come and they go. Since Thursday people across the Commonwealth and beyond have been marking and celebrating the Platinum Anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II's regency. Many the tributes that were and are being made. She is the head of the United Kingdom with Northern Ireland. The Union is a fragile construct. The monarchy is a parliamentary monarchy. Power resides in parliament. She is its titular head by birth and office. She is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England.

Here at Christ Church we acknowledge frequently that this life which is a gift, which is to be valued, is transitory meaning brief, short. The word transitory however has a double meaning, as we are also in transit. We are crossing over. We need the mariner's compass to navigate well amid and through the changes and chances of this fleeting world. This life is but a station on the way, albeit one in which we are called to flourish and to do all we can empowered by the Holy Spirit that others may flourish as well. We believe this is best done as Christians by calling to mind for example Joel's prophecy as Peter does, 'Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' Everyone who bows the knee at the name of Jesus will be saved. Knowing God's revelation of himself and his power to save is what sets us free.

Many of us, perhaps most of us, maybe all of us, are grateful to God for the Queen and the gift of faith that is hers and to which she witnesses in her regular Sunday church attendance and on high and holy days, as well as and

especially in her Christmas messages across the decades. We must not take her royal witness for granted. As Christians we must always be pointing to the Queen as a fellow member of the Body of Christ, a sister in the faith, and to the faith to which her whole life witnesses and by which she is sustained.

In the same manner we need to be continually pointing to the Union Jack with its three crosses of St George, St Andrew and St Patrick. Each witnessing to something fundamental. There is a spiritual struggle. This witness is costly. We need to learn to value God's kingdom of which we are citizens. As Christians let us resist the spreading of Christian amnesia about the origins of monarchy as shaped around the example of our Lord. We call to mind the Prince of Wales' motto, 'Ich dien.', being German for 'I serve.', modelled on the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me try and sum up briefly by returning to the question. 'What does this mean?' 'What does this mean?' that men and women, Galileans at that, are proclaiming the mighty deeds of God. It means that the longed for Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ has come and that his work of teaching, healing, proclaiming, reconciling continues through his people being empowered by 'the Power from on High' as Jesus refers to the Spirit in John. There is now a name under heaven by which men and women can be made whole in their relations with one another across the globe: be saved, reconciled, atoned as in atonement: one with. It is as we see not a reversal of the tower of Babel, but rather an overcoming of the confusion that was its purpose by grace. The different languages need no longer remain separate from one another as they are being given a new belonging in Christ, which sustains diversity by being in Christ. Language, ethnicity, nation states can be overcome and unity uncovered in our differences by our membership of his Body, the Kingdom of God.

As I look at these flags, some with more approval than others, I know that Christ is to rule over all of them and that in him they can flourish. The necessity to live and make known the mighty deeds of God empowered by the Holy Spirit in the highways and byways of this world is a not a duty we can lay aside, but need to be committed to. It won't look the same in each place, and in each community. It doesn't need to, but each Christian community worth its salt is committed to the question "What does this mean?" It is a question we cannot sidestep. Let me finish with a statement by a public exemplar of the gift of faith that is ours.

'I know just how much I rely on my own faith to guide me through the good times and the bad. Each day is a new beginning, I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that the day brings, and to put my trust in God. Like others of you who draw inspiration from your own faith, I draw strength from the message of hope in the Christian gospel.' (The Queen's Christmas message, 2002)

And why not? One more!

"I have been – and remain – very grateful to you for your prayers and to God for his steadfast love. I have indeed seen his faithfulness."

(Foreword for The Servant Queen, 2016)

Amen.