

Sermon - PENTECOST 2020

I hope you were impressed by our linguistics at the start of this morning's service'

It's not just to show off — that we can use Google — but to illustrate what was said in our epistle this morning that as the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in other languages — not just the indecipherable tongues, for anyone who has heard Charismatic outpourings, - but actual languages which mad people in the crowd exclaim, "How is it that we hear each one of us in our own native language."

Jerusalem would have been thronged with pilgrims from all over the world far the major Jewish festivals, and Pentecost was a kind of Jewish Harvest Festival, celebrating the end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest. It also commemorated the giving of the law to Moses on Mt Sinai.

And, of course, all those different languages were needed as the church after Pentecost began to grow and expand all over the known world, becoming an international religion rather than a Jewish/Christian sect centred in Palestine.

All over the world, in many different languages. in many different countries, Pentecost is being celebrated today.

In a recent book, Mark Oakley. Dean of St. John's College, Cambridge, mentions the different customs in celebrating Pentecost down the ages.

For instance, in medieval Bavaria, they would lower a wooden bird from the ceiling of the church to represent the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples. However, it was realised that the Holy Spirit is far from being wooden and lifeless, so as they lowered the dove choirboys up in the roof galleries would tip buckets of water on the congregation below to drench them with the Holy Spirit, a sort of literal baptism with the Holy Spirit. I can imagine some very un-holy language from some of the congregation below!

In some parts of Europe the courts were closed and servants' work suspended. The message was clear — the Spirit sets you free from being prisoner to unhealthy habits and thoughts. By the Spirit you are no longer a slave but a child of God.

In France it was customary to blow trumpets during the service on Pentecost Sunday. This was to symbolise the sound of the rushing mighty wind — the call of God to us to shake us out of our lethargy and complacency, blowing away the cobwebs of dull conformity and tradition.

In Oriental churches the congregation would bend their knees and read poetry. The kneeling a sign of submitting to the will of God and the reading of poetry an acknowledgement that the Holy Spirit inspires art and literature, and not just 'churchy' activities.

There is a very significant passage in Exodus as Moses began building the Tabernacle to house the Ark of the Covenant. He told the people that God had filled Bezalel with his divine spirit" to "devise artistic designs and to work in gold, silver, bronze" and other materials. The Holy Spirit is not confined only to religion, but is to be seen in art, craft, music and literature. In deed, Christians have no monopoly on the Holy Spirit. He blows where he wills, inside and outside the church.

In Russia today flowers and fresh green branches are carried into church — because the Spirit is ever fresh, never dry or withered, and the fruits of the Spirit — love, joy, peace - should be evident in our lives.

And talking of flowers, in Italy it was the custom to scatter rose petals from the ceiling of the church to symbolise the tongues of fire that seemed to appear and rest on the heads of the disciples.

And here in England, Pentecost was and is known as Whitsunday because of the white clothes worn by those who were baptised on this day. In days gone by Whitsun ales were brewed in honour of the day, no doubt justified by the fact that the onlookers on the first Pentecost thought the disciples were drunk, even though it was only nine o'clock in the morning. They never had breakfast in a Wetherspoons!!

The storms last weekend were a week too early. But they left plenty of evidence — branches, twigs and leaves everywhere. Like the first Pentecost there was a violent rushing wind.

So where is the evidence of the Spirit in our churches? Some of us like things to be neat and tidy and tight — to be able to control and manage what goes on. And that's OK in its place. But sometimes the blowing of the Spirit makes things untidy and unpredictable, pushing us along new paths, making us consider new possibilities and new ways of doing things.

But that's a sign of life, a sign that the Church, the Body of Christ, is alive and active, not fossilised and frigid but open rather than closed to change.

Sometimes in trying to be so right we can be dead right! It has been said that the only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth!

So may the Spirit's tongues of fire defrost what has become cold and cynical. and may the Spirit's rushing wind blow away the cobwebs and reveal neglected possibilities that were shelved because we didn't want to be disturbed or to put in the effort.

It shouldn't take a coronavirus pandemic to consider what should be "the new normal". After all, this is Pentecost Sunday!