

## Pentecost 2016: United across differences in the Spirit

[I am very glad that through the Education and Worship Committee and the PCC we chose to make today's celebration of Pentecost a 'united St George's service'. In so far as we chose to invite all three congregations to combine in one act of worship, the title of today's worship as 'Parish Communion' is very fitting. Today is an all-embracing occasion. It was, of course, a conscious choice also, to be doing this on the Day of Pentecost. To be supported and inspired by the vision of Pentecost takes us to a theological place that is supremely appropriate.]

The story of Pentecost begins in the book of Genesis, with the story of the tower of Babel. And the story goes that, "the whole world had one language and the same words". In a level place this one people decides to build a city and a tower "with its top in the heavens". They say, "let us make a name for ourselves". And so there comes into view the desire for identity, in this case collective identity. In the book of Genesis, acquiring identity or personhood is framed within a narrative about being drawn into relationship and being named. In Genesis Ch 2, the story of the man naming the animals and establishing a mutuality between humanity and the natural creation is followed by the story of the naming of the Man and the Woman as they become for each other a helper and a partner. So when the people on the plain set out to make a name for themselves, we infer that something good is afoot. There is something profoundly necessary about the search for identity. And yet it becomes apparent quickly that there is something going wrong here. For, to make a name for themselves, is not the same as to be given a name. There is a lurking transgression going on, a usurping of boundaries. The people are not content with building a city. They want a tower up into the heavens as well. And so it is that God sees that this militant intent, "is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them". And so God must intervene, "come let us go down

and confuse their language..., so that they will not understand one another's speech'. So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the earth." The irony of this story is that out of the dispersion of peoples with their languages and customs and habits and particularities comes the world as we know it: the world of finely crafted identities. Yet there is something uneasy underlying this story, which is the threat that the crafting of identity, good and important as it is, can all too easily transmute into the assertion of identity, the desire for dominance or even the desire to eliminate others. Babel suggests that *collective identity is on the one hand essential yet on the other hand is inherently unstable*. We know this from the continuing refugee crisis in Europe, from the recent invasion of Eastern Ukraine – notably signposted in last night's winning Eurovision song contest entry sung by a young Ukrainian Tartar woman from the Crimea – and from almost every instance where fault-lines appear in disputes between groups and nations.

Alongside Babel, however, there is Pentecost! The Day of Pentecost is often caricatured as a 'reversal of Babel', and rightly so. In so far as the confusion of languages of Babel becomes a communication across languages at Pentecost, a reversal is exactly what we witness! Where once there was estrangement, now there is relationship with understanding. There are devout Jews living in Jerusalem, and visitors for the festival, from all over the known world – Parthia, Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Asia, Crete, Egypt, Libya and Arabia. And as they *listen intently to the enraptured disciples*, "each one heard them speaking in the native language of each". And they marvel, saying, "are not all these who are speaking Galileans?... how is it that we hear, each of us in our own native language?" Peter goes some way to explaining things when he says this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel, where, "in the last days God declares 'I will pour out my spirit on all flesh,'" and it's happening now among the apostles, who had been instructed to wait for it!.... This is God's time!....

As we witness the Pentecost phenomenon in Acts ch2 we necessarily will ask: what are the implications for us and in the present of *communication across differences that is born of the Spirit?* And my sense is that this is very significant, potentially! *If the Spirit bestows a unity and confers a collective identity that is secure within itself and non-threatening to outsiders or others, truly this must a gift from God?!!....* In the first place, in our own setting of St George's in today's service, we have deliberately chosen to wait upon the Spirit, to breathe into us a deeper sense of unity across our differences within our three congregations. We may well feel that actually our differences are minimal, and they are not so much differences as 'preferences' that we live with comfortably; and yet we know, I think, that there is indeed this potential fragility attaching to all separate identities, with scope for slippage into factionalism, that is potentially always a threat that can undermine unity. We know this to be the case in the wider Church of England and in the Anglican Communion – and for this reason we need to implore the power of the Spirit to breathe upon us afresh. This is the principle reason why we have gone to the trouble of making these different arrangements today.

Another example of choosing deliberately to place ourselves in the path of the mighty, rushing wind of the Holy Spirit, has been the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations with our Malawian partners. And which of us who has met Bishop Fanuel during his stay, enjoyed fellowship, or engaged in conversation with him, cannot say that his visit to our parish has not been an occasion of profound learning and delight in this very domain in which the Spirit brings unity across differences? He himself expressed repeatedly his strong sense of our unity as fellow Anglicans across 50 years, referencing the prayer of Jesus to the Father in John Ch17 that "they may be one as we are one." And in his presentation last Monday evening, he elaborated on this, outlining some of the key ways in which the partnership has been mutually beneficial. What has happened in these days, for those of us fortunate enough to spend time with Bishop Fanuel is, I think, something akin to what is referred to in today's gospel

reading from John Ch14. Here Jesus says, that if only Philip will believe that the Father is in him and he is in the Father – that Jesus is the bearer of the gift of eternal life – then he, Jesus, will *reveal* that there is *another* Advocate to come, namely the Spirit of truth, who will abide with him and be in him. AND, this Holy Spirit will not simply remind disciples of what Jesus has said and taught and done (which will of course happen), but the Spirit will *teach you everything (repeat)*. I don't know about you, but I feel that in these few days with Bishop Fanuel we have *been taught by the Spirit...* I feel we have learnt so much – not primarily about Malawi as a country or even about the churches there or the priorities of the Diocese of Northern Malawi – although about all these things many of us know a lot more than before – but principally what we have learnt has been through the *gift of unity brought by the Spirit*, that throws a bridge across whatever are the cultural, economic or circumstantial differences between us and Bishop Fanuel or Malawi, and bestowed on us a sense of blessing that cannot be tied down but is as real as the light of day! This is surely of the gifting of Pentecost!.... And this is perhaps a good moment to say a public thank you to everyone who made Bishop Fanuel's visit so rich for him and for us all, by cooking or preparing food, offering hospitality at home, setting out furniture in church, supporting the events and praying for the success of the visit. These things created the context for a time of great blessing. In addition, I would like to thank particularly Pat Bullock and Jenny Astley as our two stalwart members of the Mission Partnership Committee for their confidence in proposing to the PCC, with me, that we should put our best foot forward and offer to host. Thank you for that confidence in the ways of the Spirit!

Thus far I have envisioned the Spirit at Pentecost as active among the apostles and fellow Jewish believers, i.e. between the Galilean, also Jewish, apostles and the devout Jews of every nation. In this common, 'majority', reading, Pentecost is being thought of as an intra-religious phenomenon. When this interpretation is brought into a modern setting it translates into a gifting of the Spirit as belonging within and across the

Christian community. This is the basis for most elaboration of the passage. Another reading, however, sees the Judeans or Jerusalemites as distinct from the Galileans. After all, the Galileans are being disparaged by the Jerusalemites for being drunk. This exposes what may be a common prejudice against the Galileans and a fault line between these groups. In this reading, the work of the Spirit is to inspire unity across differences other than intra-religious ones: rather, between different ethnic groups or possibly national groups. This opens up new interpretative possibilities. On Thursday of this week Jenny Uff and I were at the annual Council of Christians and Jews study day. The day set out to tackle the vexed subject of how Jews and Christians conceive and speak about the Holy Land. And the question was, 'Can we talk about the Holy land?'.... Can we have a good conversation and ongoing dialogue, or, are all our conversations doomed to failure as we misunderstand and misrepresent each other, with a wedge driven between us – Christians criticising Jews by implication as the actions of the State of Israel are deplored, and Jews being apparently reluctant to question what being a Holy Land may imply for others than themselves. In a sentence, what happened was that we found that we could talk about this. A conversation was crafted in which our different perspectives could be articulated and discussed, at least broadly. What I am suggesting, therefore, is that surely here is an example of the activity of the same Holy Spirit, this time working wonders by deepening understanding between faiths?.... Acts Ch2 leads us, I think, not only to consider the work of the Holy Spirit within the Christian community, supremely important as this is, but also as active in promoting deeper unity between human beings in multiple ways. Like the Jerusalemites, we dwell in a city of every nation and language, so why wouldn't the Holy Spirit be leading us into deeper mutuality, trust and relationship across all ethnic, cultural and faith boundaries?

The footnote I would like to add to these reflections is that I am conscious that the gift of Pentecost of a collective identity in the Spirit that is stable,

mutually-enhancing and complementary *is indeed a gift*. It is not something, I think, that we can rely on as some kind of assumed inheritance – a guaranteed spiritual dynamic. When the Spirit came, it was as tongues of fire resting on each one; tongues that might as easily have come to rest elsewhere or in another place and at another time. They came as gift and not by right. This suggests, I think, that we do well to remain alert to the warnings of Babel about the inherent instability in corporate, collective life, be that in the churches or in other structures of society. Every commonality is risky. On the other hand, the blessing of Pentecost is forever before us and we rejoice in it today. The tongues of fire and rushing wind liberate us to allow the Spirit to come among us and rise up within us, and to draw us ever deeper into unity of purpose and mutual understanding. Amen.

1980 Words

May 15<sup>th</sup> 2016

Reverend Julian Francis