Pentecost – the feast of the Holy Spirit

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The Day of Pentecost – Acts 2, Ps 104 Rom 8, John 15 & 16

Pentecost Sunday is also the culmination of the week of prayer for Christian unity. It's very appropriate. Pentecost is the feast of the Holy Spirit bringing to birth the world-wide Church; the Church in all its amazing diversity. The Spirit fulfils the promise God made to Abraham and Sarah; that through their descendants, every family of Earth would be blessed. Gen 12 Today, we saw it begin in our first reading. There's a good case for calling the book of Acts *the Acts of the Spirit*.

Each pilgrim heard the disciples speaking in their own native language. People from all over the known world; from Rome, Africa, Crete, Turkey, Arabia, Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, you name it. They heard ordinary people from fishing villages in Galilee speaking all their heart languages to tell them about God's deeds of power. And that day, about 3,000 of them responded and received baptism.

It's an amazing event. Some people say the curse of Babel Gen 11 is reversed in this moment. The curse of confusion and estrangement was healed by a new creation of understanding and community. These Galileans could suddenly to speak the various human languages of their time. Everyone could understand. Everyone was included. It's one of the important messages of that first Christian Pentecost. God is *for* inclusion *and* God is *for* diversity. There's no pressure to conform; no forcing everyone to speak the same language. All are addressed in their own language, all invited; belong as you are. God is for a unity that embraces inclusion and diversity.

It's something we see in the older Jewish Pentecost, called *Shavuot*; the festival of the giving of the Torah. One text that Jewish people always read at this festival is the story of Ruth. She was a foreign woman who received the Torah and so became a Jew. She was to become the great grandmother of David; their most revered king. Pentecost says everyone's in. Everyone *really* belongs.

At the first Christian Pentecost, God included people by giving the disciples a gift of the various languages of that time so all the foreign pilgrims to Jerusalem *heard the disciples speaking in their own native language*.

Many Christians today also experience a gift of tongues, but in their case, we're talking about something different from the human languages of today's story. We're talking about the tongues of angels.

You may be familiar with the expression *tongues of angels* from the reading we often hear at weddings, 1st Cor 13; the hymn to love. *Though I speak in the tongues or mortals and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal*. Tongues of angels. Many people have this gift; many don't. And there are various attitudes to it. People in Pentecostal Churches value the gift very much. People in many other Churches tend to be suspicious of people using the gift in public worship. Paul teaches in 1 Cor 14 that if we have this or any other spiritual gift, its value is measured by the way we use it to build up an inclusive community of Jesus. Pentecost as we've seen *is* about *everyone* being in; *everyone* belonging.

I should say that I don't have the gift of tongues, but it's a most beautiful thing to hear – particularly singing in tongues. But what are tongues? What's going on?

In 1 Cor 14, Paul writes that this gift is mostly something that strengthens the believer who has the gift. He says it's

not to be something which should dominate public worship. So in congregations that are used to this today, if someone speaks in tongues publicly – at the microphone – everyone will wait for someone to give an interpretation; to say what the angels' message to them might be. And then someone else with a prophetic gift of discernment is expected to confirm the interpreted message. What is given must build up the Church, otherwise it can't be received. So, as I said, more often, people with this gift exercise it privately – it builds them up in their faith so that they're better able to build up their churches.

This is not something that I'm aware of happening much in this parish. So given God's love of diversity and inclusion, and particularly at this feast of Pentecost, and the week of prayer for Christian unity I thought it appropriate to talk about it.

I believe at our Baptism, the Holy Spirit enters us and begins to pray *for* us and *with* us from deep within our hearts. Rom 8 26-7 The Spirit knows the deepest needs and gifts of our hearts better than we do. And in her love for us, she holds them up in prayer before the throne of grace. A very important, life-long process of prayer for us is to learn to hear those prayers of the Spirit and to let her prayers shape our own; to bring our prayer into harmony with hers. We can only receive this as a gift. I believe some people are given the gift of hearing, from their own tongues, the prayers which the Holy Spirit speaks from their hearts. It's a beautiful thing; it calls us to participate in the love and understanding that flows within the Trinity, and for that miraculous honour poured out on us, I give God thanks and praise. Amen