

HAPPY BIRTHDAY.

I know that Nick always finishes the morning service by asking if anyone has a birthday.

But this morning I am starting with a birthday wish because it is a birthday we all share.

Our Christian family is just over 2000 years old today.

AND another cause for celebration --

Spring has come at last. What a miracle it is when, every year, the plants and trees, which have been bare, just burst into green. Compare what we see around us now with the view we had only a month or so ago. A scene starkly described in the opening lines of a poem "The Darkling thrush" by Thomas Hardy --

"I lent upon a coppice gate when frost was spectre grey
And winter's dregs made desolate the weakening eye of day".

This is a picture of how the first disciples must have felt after the ascension.

The world probably looked grey and dead without Jesus' presence. Where was the help he had promised them, to give them the confidence, to reach out to others, and continue to live according to his example?

So what happened to change this?

Look at our reading from Acts.

Spring arrived, at Pentecost, a new birth of hope and faith, a sense that they weren't alone. Christ was still with them in the form of the Holy Spirit.

They probably didn't have the words to describe this transformation. The disciples recorded that it felt like being blown by a gale-force wind.

We can all relate to that. It is a power that we have no control over, nor can we see it, but we can certainly feel its power. It has a real and measurable effect on us, particularly if we are trying to walk against its force.

And suddenly the disciples saw what they try to describe as God's power in the form of tongues of flame resting on each of them.

TONGUES is important here because this was the final commission Jesus had left with them "to go out and TELL as many people as they could about him".

It reminds me of the story of Moses in the Old Testament. He had run away from Egypt because he had killed an Egyptian and was hiding out in the Sinai desert, working as a shepherd.

He certainly had no intention of returning to Egypt where, if discovered, he would certainly face the death penalty. But he comes upon a bush which is burning with "flames of fire" but is never consumed. God speaks to Moses and tells him that he has to go back to Egypt and rescue his own people -- the

remnants of the Jewish tribes who had arrived centuries earlier and were being persecuted and forced into slavery by the Egyptians.

He is very reluctant to accept God's commission and suggests that his brother Aaron is a better orator. But Moses eventually complies with God's will.

The task of the first disciples was to rescue their fellow Jews from their slavery to SIN, by telling them about the salvation brought about by Jesus' death on the cross.

The disciples knew they would face opposition from the authorities and possibly be put to death for blasphemy. Look at what happened to Stephen not much further into the narrative when he tried to speak about his faith.

But God's power came in the form of the Holy Spirit upon Moses, Peter and Stephen.

Their tongues were given the power they needed to deliver God's message.

I'm sure we often feel that we don't have the words to express our faith to others.

But look at what it says in our reading in verse 4 -- The Holy Spirit enabled them to have the words which made sense to those from many nations who had gathered to listen to them.

I don't think it necessarily means that they all became great linguists. I think it is much more likely that, relying on the Holy Spirit, their message made sense and appealed to their diverse audience.

Perhaps we also have to be careful about the vocabulary we use when we speak to other people about what we believe. Many of the words we use -- like redemption /salvation/ seeing the light / may not resonate with them and their daily experience of life.

We may not feel called to speak to large crowds like Peter, but sometimes the opportunity may occur to talk to friends and neighbours. And it may not even be what we say that bears witness. Think about the phrase “Actions speak louder than words”.

So today we celebrate a birthday -- the beginning of the Christian Church.

Of course these first disciples didn't refer to themselves as Christians -- they were all Jews, either by birth or conversion. They still worshiped in the Temple in Jerusalem and in their local synagogues -- until they were thrown out.

But what made them different from their fellow Jews was that they had discovered a new relationship with God.

That Jesus had died for all of them -- rich and poor; not just for Jewish men but for women as well. And later they realised that Jesus had come not just for people of Jewish descent but for the whole world.

The Holy Spirit is a creative force.

It was through the Spirit that all life began – just look at the first verses of the book of Genesis.

The first act of creation --

“In the beginning when God created the Heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the deep. A WIND FROM HEAVEN (*or can be translated as The Spirit*) swept over the waters, and God said “Let there be light” and there was light.

This is the HOLY SPIRIT in action, which was offered individually to each of those first believers at Pentecost and which WE can still experience today, to help us be the sort of people God wants us to be.

The HOLY SPIRIT can give us the courage to accept the challenge to share the good news with other people. We might, like Peter, be accused of being foolish (or even drunk) when what we say seems to run against the common norms of our day. It is unlikely that we will have to face the same fate as Stephen, but there are many of our fellow Christians all over the world who are still suffering persecution and even death for declaring their faith in Jesus.

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I feel that the poem I referred to at the beginning offers some explanation. The world can look bleak and lonely. And many people have felt this over the past year. But today we can acknowledge that we HAVE recognised the HOPE that the thrush’s song brings, despite all that is going on around us. The poem finishes like this--

So little cause for carolling
Of such ecstatic sound
Were written on terrestrial things
Afar or near around
That I could think there trembled
Through his happy good night air
Some blessed hope
Whereof he knew
And I was unaware

But we are aware of that hope.
And I would like to finish with the words of a well-known
hymn which, if we were allowed to sing, we would probably
have sung this morning, and use it like a prayer --

Breathe on us breath of God,
Fill us with life anew
That we may love what Thou dost love
And do what Thou wouldst do.

Breathe on us breath of God,
Till we are wholly thine,
Until this earthly part of us
Glows with Thy fire divine.

Amen