

Year C Pentecost

Acts 2: 1-21

Romans 8: 14-17

John 14: 8-17 & 25-27

I am not very good at languages. Just ask anyone who joined with me a few weeks ago to walk El Camino Inglés and witnessed my attempts. Despite listening to lots of Spanish language lessons on my iPod, my memory for words when trying to speak to someone in Spain seemed to desert me. It was only towards the end of the six days of walking that I felt like my 'ear' had tuned in a bit and I could speak a few sensible sentences that the person I was speaking to understood. And thankfully, most of the people I tried to speak to, were willing to listen and respond.

So, imagine the scene when the Holy Spirit gave the gift of languages to the apostles! The Holy Spirit gave more than that ability; it also took that ragbag collection of disciples and transformed them into apostles. The word 'disciple' comes from the root word whose primary meaning is 'learning'. The word 'apostle' means 'to be sent out'. This is a distinct change in the description of the twelve.

We can see that one of the first impacts of the gift of the Holy Spirit was one of transformation; each of the twelve was now able, in the Spirit, to go out to all peoples and declare the good news. All well and good, but the gift was going to have a quite limited impact if it was only imparted in Aramaic, and possibly in Greek. How were all the other peoples of the world to receive this good news?

I wondered briefly if it might have been better for the Holy Spirit to have made all the peoples of the earth return to using a common language, as they had done so before Babel. But that isn't what happened. I like to think that the richness, the nuances of individual languages, the concepts they convey, the contexts based on the geographical locations across the world meant it would have been a bad idea to having one common language again.

We all know that the crowd, from many different nations, speaking different languages were able to understand what the apostles said to them – well most of them.

And that is a curious thing. Some of the people who heard them and realised they could understand what they were saying, even though the hearers knew no Aramaic, tried to dismiss what they were saying. They claimed the apostles were drunk. This was a clear attempt to deny and ultimately reject what the apostles were saying. I find it fascinating that in that crowd some people denied the experience they were having. Their minds and ears were closed to hearing the good news, even though they could understand it if they wanted. Even today, sadly, that is so.

The Holy Spirit had impacted in such a wonderful way on the apostles, who were ready to receive its gifts, but the Holy Spirit was not going to force any person in the crowd, or elsewhere for that matter, to accept the good news. Each person had to decide for themselves whether they wanted to hear the good news. And sadly, in that powerful, historic, and earth-changing moment, there were people intentionally deaf to the word and love of God.

But it comes as no surprise that in the crowd who gathered there were many who listened and who were willing to receive the good news. These people became part of the new way, of the movement of the followers of Christ. On that day those people who were open to the good news received the breath of God for themselves; they became members of the community and received the Holy Spirit.

What does 'receiving the Holy Spirit' actually mean. In our gospel reading Jesus explains he is going to leave the disciples and will give them the Paraclete, in Greek, 'allos parakletos'. Parakletos means 'called to one's side', i.e. someone who gives aid and support, hence often referred to as 'comforter' or 'advocate'. Allos means 'another of the same sort'. So, from this we come to understand that the Holy Spirit will be like Jesus and God and will always be at our side. The Holy Spirit will be alongside the disciples, will be in relationship with them, and of course, support them. In verse 26 we are told the Holy Spirit will do two very important things: give them instruction on what they do not yet know, and secondly bring to their minds all that they have heard from Jesus.

The gift of the Holy Spirit flowing from that momentous day, has continued to flow through the centuries, down to us today. We are called by Christ to continue the work of the apostles; that is, to evangelise, to go out and spread the good news.

And yet, whenever I talk about this, I sense the anxiety and nervousness amongst those who are listening, especially when I use the 'E' word, 'evangelise'. Anxiety about what do I say, how much do I really know, will I be able to answer anyone's questions.... And so on.

Well let me try and put the anxious at ease. You are already evangelists, spreading the good news. First off, how you live your life, how you treat your neighbour, how you show love for one another, how you care for the least in our society, how you choose to spend your time, are all visible to those who live around us. And as we know, actions are a far more powerful witness than our words.

Secondly, in talking about faith, most people are not going to behave like the Spanish Inquisition. They are unlikely to challenge you on the theory of transubstantiation, or the finer details of St Paul's use of the term 'in Christ' in his letters.

Most people are likely to ask what you like about church. That should be safe territory for all of us here, although I suspect we may all answer slightly differently, but most will include being part of a community that not only cares for its own but looks outside to care for others in our local community and across the world. In truth, many people initially like belonging to a community in church before they develop a stronger sense of faith and belief.

We should not be put off if some people rapidly change the subject, or politely say they are not interested. For as we heard, even on the day of Pentecost there were some who refused to engage, to deny what was happening right in front of their eyes. Hopefully, no-one will accuse you of being drunk!

And if people do have some deeper or more detailed questions about faith, it is perfectly fine for you to say you don't know, and suggest they speak to me.

And if people think we are judgemental and bigoted, what might we say in response? And what if people think we all read the Bible literally and slavishly adhere to every instruction in the Old Testament? What might you say in response?

It is good to think of these things, and to have a sense of what you would be comfortable responding to and what you would refer on. It is also good to consider if you do have some knowledge gaps that you would like to fill, and letting me know so we can provide some faith development sessions at

suitable times to help people. There is nothing wrong in not knowing, or not being clear. What I can assure you is that I don't have all the answers and in some instances I can point out the different understandings that there are around a subject. Hopefully, by now you will know that I do not tell you what you must believe. I would not insult your intelligence or your independent spirit.

The power of the Holy Spirit is immeasurable. Sometimes we are prompted to start a conversation, with no idea where it may go or how we may respond. We have to trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to lead us, to guide us, and to respond in the moment. The Holy Spirit is part of the Trinity of love and community with God the Father and the Son. When we hold that image, it can give us the courage and strength to go beyond what we have done before, to step out and grow.

Last week I invited you to pray for five people for eight days. Today is the eighth day. I am going to give you a new two-fold challenge today. Firstly, to continue praying for your five people, and in conjunction with that to pray that you may find the opportunity to talk with them and invite some or all of them to church for our 'Invitation Sunday' service on 4<sup>th</sup> September.

And whilst that may fill you with a sense of anxiety or concern, I ask you to pray with that sense in your hearts and ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance. And lastly, after church, there will be some pieces of paper in the hall along with some pens. You are invited to write down anything that would help you feel more confident talking to others about your faith, and how you might consider inviting people to come to church with you.

There is a poem that starts, 'Until one is committed, nothing providential happens...' I truly believe that the Holy Spirit is waiting to join with you in the conversations you may have.