

SERMON FOR PENTECOST | 09.06.2019

Acts 2: 1-21; Romans 8: 14-17; St John 14: 8-17

One of the reasons why the Book of Acts is so popular is because it is full of movie style 'big scenes'. There are sermons in there, but for the most part Acts not only takes us into the life in 1st century Palestine, Turkey, Cyprus, Malta, Greece and Italy, it wonderfully captures the goings on of some pretty formidable Biblical characters too.

We can see where St Paul was thrown off his horse and was led, blinded, into the houses of the terrified Christians he was going to arrest in Damascus; we can feel the tension as Stephen the deacon is dragged to a local square and stoned to death; we can smell the damp as St Peter lies rotting in jail and sense his excitement as the chains fall off his arms and he is able to walk out through the miraculously open doors. In there is the sea journeys of St Paul who frequently gets shipwrecked but still somehow manages to reach his destination. There too are the great arguments between the Jewish and Gentile Christians: was circumcision going to be demanded: was it still relevant and should they still keep the old rules about who they could eat with? What, too, about the roles of the new convert women who generously opened up their houses to the tiny Church or the problems with the magicians using Jesus' name to heal the sick?

But of them all, the story of Pentecost leaps out of the page. It is festival time in Jerusalem and the city feels like Leicester Square, with thousands of foreigners from every nationality in the known world, chatting away in the sunshine. It would have been like bedlam, no one understanding what the next group were on about, united only in their Jewish faith.

And then, over all the hubbub, they hear the apostles speaking: rough Galileans they may have been but, as the account says, everyone heard these men – not in rough Aramaic, their mother tongue - but in the languages of everyone gathered in that square: *Parthians, Medes and Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene, visitors from Rome, Cretans and Arabs* – each of us can hear them declaring the wonders of God.

And we all know this phenomenon: we live in London and wherever we go we meet people speaking languages we can't even identify let alone translate!

And it is difficult speaking – even in English – to those with other mother tongues. Even simple enough conversations get bogged down as we try to find vocabulary that gets across what we want to say. And it has to be not only simpler but also free of the irony, the idiomatic speech patterns and the jokes with which we pepper our conversations – based on shared experiences and shared cultural references.

Some of you may have been watching 63Up this week on ITV. What started as a piece of infant 1960s sociology has developed into a fascinating insight into the lives of a dozen or so 7 year olds who have been interviewed every seven years – since they were seven. It was based on the old saying: *give me a child when they are seven and I will show you the man/woman.*

I have been especially interested in this latest crop of interviews because I remember the 7Up series being an integral part of the sociology course that I was teaching at secondary school level in the mid 1970s. And the sheer variety of backgrounds from which the children came - city and country, rich and poor, stable families and those much less so – only serves to highlight the vast language gulf that exists in Britain today. Just the name you call the meal you eat in the evening – is it tea, dinner or supper?? – makes the point. The way we use language often says far more about us than how clever we are, how much money we have and what we are interested in.

How is it, they said, that each of us hears them declaring the wonders of God - in our own tongue?

Because that is the miracle of Pentecost: and the contrast is obvious: how come, if they could find a language that united them all in 1st century multicultural Jerusalem, then how come we can't?

And by we, I inevitably mean our politicians who are ostensibly using English but who still lack the ability to find a common language we can all feel comfortable with?

And by we, I also mean the Church.

The language the Church uses in its services has been the major topic of my ministry since I was ordained back in 1983. I am old enough to remember when some services were all in Latin (at least for Roman Catholics), when the Tudor language of the old Book of Common Prayer was the norm; and then to have lived through all the revisions of our prayer books in 1965, 1968, 1980 and again in 2000. My tiny contribution to that process has been the Easter Collects in the authorized Common Worship 'Alternative Collects' of 2004 which were all drafted at my desk in Bradford.

And what I was doing then – and what I have been doing for every Sunday for over 35 years - is to try to make the very best of the last 2000 years of Christian writing 'open and accessible' to those of us in Church today. And that is some task!

Because discovering the extraordinary things that God has done can't just be for those who can read Latin and Greek and have taken a demanding study course in biblical studies! That's what they made Elizabeth Ist do before she was 15 - and it has been what many English Christians thought was necessary right up until the second world war. And if you didn't think that was for you, you still went to Church – but you hardly took any part in the Sunday Masses because it was 'done by the priest' miles away from you - and you just sat there in silence and said your own prayers and thought your own thoughts. It didn't matter if you understood what was going on because you were just a spectator.

So the language challenge for the Church has really been over the last seventy or so, when people stopped going to Church just because everyone else did and there was a real choice about what to do with your time on a Sunday morning. So how could ordinary people get to know the best of what the Church had accumulated since Pentecost without having to become scholars?

One answer has been to simplify everything down to the absolute basics. Hymns get replaced with worship songs which are largely paraphrases from the Old Testament with good tunes and strong rhythms, the kind of thing that wouldn't be out of place on Top of the Pops.

Rituals and ceremony is stripped down to almost nothing, vestments and colour are abandoned and informality is king. You don't need a book because everything is projected onto a screen which you have to keep watching if you don't want to get lost. The Language is said to be the words we all use in the street.

Except that it isn't quite! Even evangelicals have their own 'in language' and their own ways of doing things. I know this because I have been given a crib sheet so that I can learn how to do a Eucharist this way when I go to my old Church in Rugby next weekend where this is the way they now worship.

And I guess I am sad that the simplified version of the Anglican tradition to which they have moved over the last twenty five years is almost entirely stripped of all the poetry and wisdom of the wider Church, where the words of the service, the colour, movement and symbolic actions all leave their mark on us – with their wonderful ability to stop us being entirely earth-bound.

With the careful preparation of the service sheet so that everyone knows what comes next, what we are trying to do here at St James' is to offer you the chance to take (or leave) much of what is going on. You can, mentally and spiritually, come (and go) during Mass so that God can use what is out there to lead you to the special place where he wants you to go. It won't necessarily be the same place as the person sitting next to you in the pew, but our worship is both the gathering of God's people and the place where each individual is able to meet with their God. Not everything will be understandable to everyone but some of the details, otherwise unnoticed, do have a special significance for some - and therefore we include them where we can.

Because what we do here is also part and parcel of the wonderful worship of the angels and saints. This isn't all there is! We are mirroring heaven where eternal love and beauty, peace and hope are constantly being celebrated. If everything is entirely mundane, how can our hearts and minds be lifted in those heavenly places? As Jacob said all those years ago by his desert rock, *surely this is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven!* Let us pray that the language of our worship is easy enough to understand – and deep enough to reveal how God is at work in the world! Like the Book of Acts there's a bit in there for everyone!