

Sermon/talk for Pentecost, Year A, 31 May 2020

Acts 2.1-21; Psalm 104.24-34,35b; 1 Corinthians 12.3b-13; John 7.37-39

Today's readings are so familiar aren't they? A bit like that old cardigan or jumper that you simply can't get rid of because it's so warm and comforting. But we should be careful with such familiar readings because it is so easy to miss what we might hear afresh each year! It's a bit like Christmas and Easter. It's so easy to let the familiar words just wash over us and not really have much effect. Of course, this is entirely natural and understandable. We feel comfortable with the familiar whether it's readings from the bible or clothes we turn to again and again! But at the moment we have all been pushed out of our comfort zone with the Covid-19 lockdown, even if it's now easing a little. On a personal level as many of you will already know, I have been challenged even more since a routine scan picked up the fact that my cancer had spread to my brain and my pelvis. For me suddenly there was nothing familiar I could take comfort in, only a future full of uncertainty without even being able to have hugs from my daughters or cuddles with the grandchildren.

But to a degree, this is no different from what we are all experiencing. None of us can be sure what the future holds for us at the moment and all of us can only meet with family and friends via video conferencing which is some compensation for not being able to meet in person but it is still nowhere near the same as seeing them in person and being able to hold their hands or give them a kiss or a cuddle.

But let's think about what happened on that day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Wasn't that similar to what's happening to us? It may seem completely different, but let's think about it for a moment. Certainly there was nothing familiar here! Of course, Jesus, and before him the prophet Joel, had spoken of a time when God says he will 'pour out my Spirit upon all flesh'. In the Old Testament we hear of God's spirit coming to specific individuals, but the idea that 'all flesh' would receive the Spirit was something that was going to happen at some point in the future and maybe most of the Jews believed it would happen so far in the future as not to be worth thinking about! And anyway, what did 'all flesh' actually mean?

What jumps out at me in these readings is the word 'prophecy'. Yes, there were other gifts of the Spirit and Paul talks about these. But the reading from Acts seems to focus particularly on prophecy. I don't know about you, but I find this a rather scary word. What does it actually mean and does it apply to us today or was it a bit of a one-off on that day? We can explore this by thinking about who the Old Testament prophets were and what they said and did. We may think of prophecy as a sort of fortune telling. After all, didn't the prophets tell the future? Well sort of! What they actually did was point out the sort of future the people could expect if they continued living in the way they were. Usually, this meant they weren't living the way God wanted or expected them to live. And often the prophets gave their message to those in power, especially kings, about the way they were

treating the most vulnerable members of society. Just read Amos, a short, fairly easy read and you'll see what I mean!

So maybe, whatever gifts we have from the Holy Spirit, and don't forget that we will all have different ones, just maybe, we have also been given the gift of prophesy and it wasn't just a one-off on that first day of Pentecost. But of course a gift can be rejected or left unopened. It can even be passed onto someone else if it is unwelcome! So what are we to make of this gift and what are we to do with it? I'd like to suggest that we should be using it now more than ever. We should be speaking 'truth to power' just like those Old Testament prophets. I'm afraid it may not make us very popular because we will be pointing out how God wants us to live. But maybe this is a good time to be doing this. So many things have changed for the good since the lockdown. People have helped and supported their neighbours; most of us have taken more exercise and become rather fitter (although not everyone of course!); most of us have slowed down and taken more time to read, phone friends and family, appreciated the changing season around us as the birds sing and the flowers start to bloom. Homeless people have been given safe places to stay and no longer have to sleep on the streets. We know too, that levels of air pollution have decreased dramatically, especially in cities as people have been travelling less and levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere have started dropping quite dramatically which will help with climate change. Of course there has been a downside; many people have died or been seriously ill and often their families have been unable to be at their bedsides or attend their funerals. Many people have or will lose their jobs despite the support given by the government. But in many ways the world and our way of living has changed for the better and it's up to us to ensure that we don't go back to a place where people are only valued by the level of their income and families struggle to balance the need to earn enough to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads against the need to spend more time together. I could mention so many other situations but I don't want to go on for ever! You will be able to think of lots of other things yourself which are important to you.

So when the pandemic ends, and even before that, as the lockdown starts to relax, let us think and pray about how we see God showing us how we can change the way we live for the better. Then let's pray for the gift of prophesy and when the Spirit answers our prayer, let's use that gift to 'speak truth to power' wherever and whenever we can. It may not make us popular, but if we listen to the Spirit and begin to live our lives as He wants, then maybe the future won't be so uncertain. Indeed, maybe our future and that of the Earth will become the future that God has always wanted for all his amazing Creation.

Amen