

Pentecost

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Holy Spirit, thank you that you've already been talking to each of us as we've sung, as we've prayed, as we've interacted with one another this morning.

Chatting to him, and he started sharing some of his struggles, his life kind of catching up with him. And midway through the conversation, he discovers I'm a vicar. Now, I've never seen the man's face look so shocked and surprised. And I don't know what his concept or experience, prior experience of a vicar was, but I wasn't that.

And as he spoke, I could see that his perception, he was like, oh, my perception is changing about what church is like. And so I asked him whether faith was part of his life.

Now, if you listened to me a couple of weeks ago, you'll note that that is an improvement on some of my faith sharing that I've done before. I managed to ask a good question. And indeed, he did squirm a bit, but the conversation got deeper.

[1 : 20] And I was able to share something of the hope that he could have in Jesus for his situation and for his life. And he seemed to receive that well, if still slightly surprised.

But it struck me, as I reflected on that conversation, that there are many people out there, and perhaps in here, that a connection with God is hindered because of the packaging.

The practices and traditions that have grown up around the Christian faith, rather than being sometimes windows onto God, they can be more like a concrete container.

Seemingly impenetrable, baffling, off-putting. And I'm afraid we Anglicans and Methodists have been experts in this, especially when you mix it up with colonialism.

We've transformed our norms, our ways of doing things, and forced them onto other cultures. And so there is often a disconnection and a distortion in the representation of God.

[2 : 32] There's barriers that we have put up. Now, perhaps this feels familiar to you at some point in your life, or you've got friends or family who you know that to be true.

There are these barriers to God that you know aren't really God. It may be that there are Christians that you or they have met, clergy that they have met, that have put them off, put you off, and they've given an unattractive, an unauthentic picture of what God and what faith is like.

Or it may be, a little bit like the chap I was talking to, that perhaps because of the things that have happened to you, maybe some of the choices you've made, maybe the things that have just happened to you and aren't even your fault, you're left thinking, well, God, God can't be for me.

God remains distant, confusing, irrelevant. Well, if that is you, or thinking of friends and family, perhaps you're listening to this later, Pentecost is great news for you.

Pentecost, the message of Pentecost is good news. And to help me explain why it's such good news, we're going to do something slightly interesting. We're going to go back in the Bible to give a little bit of context, if you like, paint out the sort of bad news first before we can find out why Pentecost is such good news.

[4 : 02] And we're going to go back, all the way back to Genesis, the first book of the Bible, Genesis chapter 11. Now, at this point in the history as the Bible portrays it, the world speaks only one language.

And this group of people get together, they find a plane, and they say, let's bake bricks together, and let's build a city.

And in that city, we'll build a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we can make a name for ourselves. Now, across the ancient Near East, archaeologists will tell you, there are these towers within cities, ancient cities, called ziggurats.

And they literally are shaped as if they have steps to heaven. So people can climb up, they can make their sacrifices at the top as they reach for their gods. And we're told in Genesis 11 that as

God sees this happening, this endeavour, he puts a stop to it.

And he does so by confusing their languages and scattering them. Now, you might think, why did God do that? That's very divisive. Well, it's because Babel, as it's come to know, the Tower of Babel, is a working illustration of human pride.

[5 : 31] Let's make a name for ourselves. Let's reach the heavens. And Genesis 11 is just another step in a downward spiral from when humans began thinking like that for themselves in the Garden of Eden.

Let's do this the way I want to do it. Let's ignore what God says. Let's do things my way. And as many of you will know, that meant banishment from the garden that God had created for humanity to work and to enjoy fellowship with him.

And as you go through those early chapters of Genesis, as I say, it's this downward spiral. As people rebel, as people ignore further and further, the world gets more violent and there's increasing distrust.

And it heads almost backwards from creation where you had order being made out of chaos. It starts going more chaotic again. Because humans are putting themselves in the place of God. Religion is actually not that different. If we do this, we feel we'll get closer to God. If we perform well, we will reach heaven. If I pray more, I surely will earn the respect of heaven.

[6 : 47] If I do good things, I will receive the smile of God. Surely. If you peel it back amongst often quite a lot of goodwill and sometimes unintention, at its heart, that attitude has pride.

And it's a human endeavor to work our way up those steps to God. And so it's no wonder we have so many religions because, in some sense, God has had to scatter such willful human instincts. There is, and it continues to be, as we well know, a confusion of languages. Not just, you know, that we need a different phrasebook everywhere we go, but actually, as we know, there are ethnic and cultural tensions, conflicts.

We've already been praying around some of those big ones in our world today. Nations are at odds with one another. Ethnicity is divided. And so now our world is full of Babel-like organizations and institutions and nations and lives.

Because let's get personal now. How much effort do we put into our lives to bolstering our reputations? You know, whether it's through the career that we build up for ourselves, even through family, which is a good thing, but we can really try and make it something that God didn't intend it to be.

[8 : 12] Come, let us build. Let's elevate ourselves. That is the human heart of pride speaking. But at the very next chapter, as Genesis 11 moves to 12, we see that God is beginning to plant a seed, a seed of a kingdom that is going to put things right.

I'm not going to try and run through the whole Bible, but I'll just give a little bit of a taste. We get Abraham being called. We get the people of Israel becoming formed and established.

We eventually see them move into the promised land, and the city of Jerusalem comes to being. And at the heart of Jerusalem is the temple, the place where God promises to dwell with his people. And as we read through the Old Testament, we see that actually Israel is supposed to model to the world what it looks like for the true God to come and be among his people.

On God's terms, not on humanity's terms. And I'm telling you all this because wind forward several thousand years later to the event that our reading was about today.

[9 : 31] We find that the Jewish people are gathering in Jerusalem for the festival of Shavuot or Pentecost. And that's 40 days after the festival of Passover.

It's about 30 AD. And at this stage, the people of Israel are, as we heard, scattered across the known world. They are living in various countries and regions.

They're living in different cultures. They're speaking different languages. But this major festival, many of them returned to Jerusalem to celebrate.

There were two things they celebrated, that Shavuot or Pentecost. Pentecost. It was the first of the wheat harvest, a celebration, a bringing in of the harvest. And also it celebrated the giving of the law at Mount Sinai when Moses received the Ten Commandments, etc.

So people come back to Jerusalem for this occasion. And there's no coincidence. Why is this occasion that the Lord chooses to pour out his spirit?

[10 : 37] Because, of course, let's just backtrack 40 days before, at that Passover, Jesus came to be the sort of, to culminate the model of what it was like for God to dwell with his people, to embody

what it was, for God to come in his own terms, to dwell with his people, and to live among them.

And he lived, he died, he rose again, and before he ascended to heaven, what did he do? We did this a couple of weeks ago.

He gathered 11 of his disciples and said, wait, until helper comes, to the one I send. And so here we are, with that handful of followers, maybe others, I expect, gathered with their fellow Jews in Jerusalem, but they are in a home.

They're waiting, in a house, together. together. And suddenly, a sound, like the blowing of a violent wind, came from heaven, and filled the whole house.

And then, what appeared, what seemed to be like tongues of fire, separating and coming to rest, on each of them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak, in other tongues, as that Spirit enabled them.

[12:12] Wow. Quite the commotion. And in fact, those around them, these scattered Jews, now living in different nations, they come, and they begin to hear, their own languages being spoken.

And they hear, each of those people, they're all, a lot of them are from Galilee. What are these Galileans doing? And they're speaking my language. Wow. And they hear them, declaring the wonders of God, in their own tongues.

Amazed, and perplexed, we're told, they ask one another, what does this mean? Great question.

What does it mean? But I wonder, having explored, that story of the Tower of Babel, we might be in a good position, to see a little bit, about what it means.

So Pentecost, which we now, celebrate annually, of this pouring out the Spirit, amongst these early followers of Jesus, Pentecost is often described, as the reversal, of Babel.

So instead of humans, making their way up to heaven, the Spirit, comes down. Humans become, rather than, fragmented and scattered, they become united, by the Spirit of God.

[13:28] And it puts the end, of this downward spiral, into chaos, made by human pride. And not that it's a sort of, return to the Garden, and Eden, but actually, it starts a new thing, in that it makes us, gives us, the helper we need, to move towards, the Garden City.

And I say that, quite pointedly, because if you read, the last book of the Bible, I told you, we're getting all over the place today, in the last book of Revelation, where he describes, well first of all, countless tribes, of every tongue, tribe, and nation, gathering, to worship God.

And it also describes, this new Jerusalem, coming, from heaven, to unite, with earth. And in this city, are these living waters flowing, there are trees of life growing, which are for the healing, of the nations.

And we have this, what we call it, a garden city, being described. So it's like, the Garden of Eden, but with, a community, and a civilization, as God intended it to be.

That is our, ultimate hope, and our sort of, destination folks. And so, it's not like, the spirit comes, and suddenly, everyone starts speaking, one language.

[14:46] Do you notice, that doesn't happen. It's not uniformity, it becomes unity, in diversity. It's better, than it was before. So Babel, isn't so much reversed, as it's redeemed.

And that's what God does, isn't it? He redeems stuff, even the broken stuff, even the scattered, messy stuff, he redeems it, for his glory. And we know, he does that, because that's what he did, with Jesus.

Because when Jesus died, and he conquered, the powers of evil, he defeated, the grip of sin, in our world, and in our lives. He didn't just sort of, make him alive, again, in the same way, that he was. He makes him alive again, in the power of the resurrection. It's like life plus. And so, even, as we know, the nail marks, that were used, to pin him to the cross, they find their way, into this resurrection life.

Even the worst of stuff, is found, and it's swept up, it is redeemed, by God, and used for good, in this kingdom, that God is building.

[15:57] And this is such great news. Because, no matter what we've done, even if we've spent, our whole lives, kind of like Babel, you know, building for ourselves, a structure, to support ourselves, and to make sure, that we are of good repute.

And even if that tower, is standing, whether it's tottering, or whether it's completely collapsed, God can still, use it. He can forgive, he can rebuild, he can redeem.

Because he wants to dwell with us. He wants to be with us. And this pouring out of the spirit, at Pentecost, God is, in his story of salvation, bringing the next stage, of that, kind of, making his

home with us, dwelling with us.

And as I say, that is the pattern, that in the church, and as we move towards, that new creation, he's continuing, to want to do, dwell with us, make his home with us, come amongst us.

So when the spirit comes, God's people, get a sense of being, both truly at home, and truly in heaven. We feel what it's like, to be at home, and yet also, in heaven, where God is.

[17 : 25] And a mark of that, is that when the spirit of God comes, people hear the wonders of God, in their own language. That, I believe, is at the heart of the gift of Pentecost, for us today.

We hear the wonders of God, in our own language. See, I've already mentioned, that, for whatever reason, God may be feeling distant, to you, may be confusing, may feel like, he's irrelevant, to you. But the message of Pentecost, is, that God wants to come down, to you, to draw near, to make himself known, and to speak, your language.

See, churchianity, may or may not be, something, that you like. But God, really, is, something, that you will like.

This packaging, whatever it is, that we have, may or may not help you, know what's going on. But the promise of Pentecost, is that God's Holy Spirit, wants to speak to you, directly, in ways, that you really, understand.

[18 : 40] How many of you, here are familiar, with this phrase, love languages. Anyone heard about this? Maybe, if you're getting married. Just looking at Dan there, getting married to Emily, this Friday, very exciting.

Love language. Gary Chapman came up, with these, well he didn't come up, with these, he organized them, in the 1990s, I believe. And there's this idea, that we all have, this kind of five, main love languages, that help us, when we try to relate, to one another.

They are, words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. For the past 26 years, I've been trying to tell Amy, that I love her, by washing up, and vacuuming the floor.

That is my language. But to Amy, that's like, I might as well be speaking Japanese. She gets a sense, of kind of what I'm doing, but it's not really, it's not really, speaking to her. If only, I would, spend a little time, giving more thoughtful gifts, or speak a little bit, more affirmingly, then there might be, a bit more, there might certainly be, less heartache, and miscommunications, over the years.

I won't go into any, right now. God knows, your love language. He knows, how you need, to be communicated.

[20 : 02] Not just what, but how, he needs, to meet with you. He knows, how to let you know, that he is here, and that he cares. So when we invite, the Holy Spirit, to come, as we will do, when I come to an end here, that is what we're, inviting him to do.

To meet with us, and speak with us, in our own language. Do we need comfort? He will speak words of comfort. Do we need encouragement? He will encourage.

Do we need challenge? He will challenge us. Is it a quiet whisper, that we need? Or is it a loud shout, amidst the pain, that we're going through?

Is it the younger part, of us, that needs, that reassurance? Or is it, the frail parts, of us, that need confidence? God wants to meet us, to meet us where we're at.

And when we allow him, to meet us on his terms, we can stop acting ourselves, like concrete containers. And we can find, that we can become, vessels of beauty.

[21 : 12] We can sing, the wonders of God, in tongues that make sense to us, in a language, that makes sense to us, in our acts of service, in our time that we spend, in our ways, of pouring ourselves out, in different ways.

As I've looked at this, I've thought again, about Pentecost, it's realized that, actually, there's a real danger for me, stepping into a new place, is that I become, overly concerned, about my reputation. Oh, is this going to be good Simon? Is this going to make you, you know, give you a good repute? No, no, no. That, this speaks completely, against that kind of attitude.

I need to open myself, to allow the spirit to blow, where the spirit wants to blow. And as your leader, help facilitate that amongst us.

And it starts with me. So I'm not going to be, so concerned with building, my reputation here, in ministry, but allowing the wonders of God, to be known amongst us.

[22 : 14] And then for all of us, I wonder, particularly, as I've just mentioned, that as we consider, what it might look like, to be increasingly inspired, that is God breathed, to allow spiritual renewal, to take place amongst us.

Then this really is an invitation, isn't it? How might we know, that this is happening, amongst us? Well, our passage tells us, two things. If we're, if the spirit of God, is allowed to blow amongst us, and he does that in different ways, I'm not saying, he's going to necessarily come, with tongues of fire.

Sometimes it is, in gentler, and more subtle ways. How do we know though, that God is amongst us, doing that? Two things. There is increased curiosity, and there is increased ridicule.

Okay? Increased curiosity, more people, as they watch your lives, and hear you, talk about what you love, and share what you love, they're going to be asking, what is going on?

What does this mean? Brilliant. Curiosity will increase, when the spirit of God, is moving amongst us. And I believe, that we will experience, increased unity in diversity.

[23 : 27] We will expect, more people from, all different backgrounds, ethnicities, ages and stages, to be amongst us. Completely united, but able to express themselves, more freely, with who they are.

I don't want to hear anyone say, I have to leave part of me, behind the door, when I walk, and worship together. People will be feeling attracted, to this heavenly home, here on earth.

Where healing begins to flow, and barriers, begin to be broken down. So there's, if we allow the spirit to move, there will be increased curiosity, but there will also be, increased ridicule.

We read, don't we, that at Pentecost, that first Pentecost, people made fun of them, they thought they'd had too much wine, even on a Sunday morning. I often think about, as I share communion.

When the spirit blows, there will be some people, who think we're crazy.

Though it's all a bit, too heavenly minded. A spirit filled church, is not perhaps, as predictable, as a concrete container. But it will, allow us to flow, in the spirit.

[24 : 39] And actually, that will be a sign, that a church, is being filled, with the spirit. And please don't quote me, to the bishop on this. But, I believe, if the more spirit filled, we are, the more like a pub, we will become.

Okay? Let me explain what I mean, so you don't quote me, straight away. There will be voices, raised, in worship. There will be sounds, of laughter, because of joy.

There will be, lowered inhibitions, not because of wine, but because of the security, we have in Jesus. I'm not worried, about our reputations. There will be a place, of fellowship, a place of food, a place to talk, and share our joys, and sorrows.

Not increasingly, controlled by alcohol, no, but controlled, by the spirit of God. Love this verse, in Ephesians 5, says, do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery.

Instead, be filled, with the spirit, speaking to one another, with psalms, hymns, and songs, from the spirit. Sing, and make music, from your heart, to the Lord, always giving thanks, to God the Father, for everything, in the name, of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[25 : 49] Be filled, with the spirit. I don't think, I need to say any more. I think already, something of what I've shared, has become attractive, to you.

Maybe that sense, of wanting to feel, at home. That sense, of being, who you are, in your own skin, before God. And maybe, there has been, times of, sort of pretense, masks, that we put on, before God.

Because we feel, we have to, to fit in, or that's what God, expects of us. No. The message of Pentecost is, I'll come to you, says God. I will pour out, my spirit on you.

And whatever mess, whatever fractures, and scattering, has happened, I will redeem it, and I will make it, beautiful. Come, Holy Spirit.

Thank you that you are, already in our midst. We ask now, that you would pour yourself out, and that you would open us, that we would open ourselves, to more of you, amongst us.

[27 : 01] Thank you.