

Morningside Sermon 10.30am 5/6/22

Pentecost Filled with new wine

*Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-13*

In the current world of politics, economics and society, many social commentators and historians fear the 'Balkanisation' of our community and country. The differentiation between ethnic identities, polarised politics, religious sectarianism, the growing divide between rich and poor. In this week of Platinum Jubilee celebration, one political commentator drily commented that the Prime Minister is given to us to remind us what divides us, whereas the Queen has been given to us to remind us what unites us. Historian Robert Hardman notes that the Queen is supposed to be as infallible as the Pope and as neutral as Switzerland, while also being human, interesting, broadly positive and always likeable. Irony is never far from the British observation of life.

We also find it in the Genesis reading. There is a poetic Bible imagining of why different languages came about. God sent a confusion of languages to a people who were getting a bit beyond themselves, 'making a name for ourselves', the Bible says, and pushing God aside.

God intervenes. "What are they up to now?" God muses ironically, knowing full well the human potential to grasp and misrepresent and misunderstand. It is not out of pettiness or fear but an attempt to slow down the feverish pace of life and to remind people to rest in the belief that God will provide.

We don't have to do it all **by** ourselves or *for* ourselves. God's love is given, not earned. We Christians do not have to make a name for ourselves or claw our way to the heavens. Our names are already written in heaven, as Jesus said in Luke's gospel. Humans are always misunderstanding the nature of their God-given gifts and talents: wanting to be like gods and not wanting to be like ourselves. Our best selves. Aspiration and endeavour are not the same as grasping and presumption. We are always misunderstanding God, and our relationship with God, and what God is saying to us.

In the Book of Acts, we find something similar. In the mystery of God's outpouring Spirit people still speak in many different languages, but about the one message of God's greatness. All the nationalities present on that day of Pentecost hear about God in a language that they can

understand. But some onlookers ironically, or more probably cynically, comment that the followers of Jesus are, 'filled with new wine.'

How often does the world hear the good news that Jesus comes to bring hope and healing and treat it as nonsense, or madness, or little better than inebriation? I'm reading a rather depressing book on the state of Christianity in Scotland and being reminded that the decline in faith goes back not to the 1960s but possibly the 1860s and even before that when industrialisation happened. When the Church of Scotland had an impressive membership of over 1.3 million in 1956, only around 21% were in Church on a Sunday when a survey was taken. The collapse of 'community' in new housing estates, in suburban areas, and in the depopulated rural parts of the country, alongside the demise of the extended family, and the rise of a property-owning democracy spending all the hours God sends to pay the mortgage, or school fees, or rising energy bills has led many to find no place for faith, and the Church, in their everyday lives. Anyone talking about the joy faith in Jesus brings them, or the inspiration being part of a benevolent community like the Church offers them, is often mocked, or side-lined as 'embarrassing', or simply ignored as irrelevant, or somehow dangerous because of some unspecified but latent fanaticism.

For those of us still with faith, battered and fragile though it can be, we often keep quiet about it, in case we attract criticism, or hostility, or confronted by the aggressive statements about the hell-fire and brimstone God presumed to be the One we believe in, where in fact our God, though tough, is full of mercy, forgiveness and second chances. We start talking about God and we too, like the first Christians, are looked at askance, and find people wondering if we too are 'filled with new wine'. Simpletons, somewhat naïve, and possibly a little drunk.

But we're not drunk. We're faithful. We're listening to God's promptings. We are responding as best we can.

The experience of lockdown, still with many in the form of nervousness and tiredness and hesitation, has had a demonstrable side-effect in a society crippled by individualism, affluence and consumerism. The more our liberties were restricted, the more we were told about the people we couldn't meet, the places we couldn't go, the things we couldn't do, the more many people

actively sought means by which to keep in touch. The need for connection, the need to feel we were in this together, was overwhelming. We phoned and we e-mailed, and we Zoomed and we WhatsApp-ed. We looked out for neighbours and noticed the missing ones. We found accommodation for virtually all of the homeless who wanted accommodation. We had extra collections for Foodbanks. We used the up side of technology to foster connection, not to intensify isolation.

We did the same things that those accused of being 'filled with new wine' at the beginning of the Christian Church did: "...fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done...And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need...they partook of food with glad and generous hearts..."<sup>i</sup> When the restrictions were lifted, many reverted. The sense of community faded, the barriers returned, and people looked inwards once more.

The Platinum Jubilee comes along, centred upon a devoted woman of faith, who would not be who she is without her publicly expressed faith in Jesus Christ, Who she talks about not only at Christmas but on many occasions. In the time of the pandemic at its worst it was Her Majesty's words that gave comfort and steadiness and hope to many:

*"Using the great advances of science and our instinctive compassion to heal, we will succeed, and that success will belong to every one of us. We should take comfort that while we may have more still to endure, better days will return. We will be with our friends again. We will be with our families again. We will meet again."*<sup>ii</sup>

Is that being, "Filled with new wine"? It's not even her favourite Gin and Dubonnet; allegedly. In whatever language you speak, the Queen's message of faith, hope and love resounded clearly. In St Paul's Cathedral on Friday, the Archbishop of York said, *"What I see in Her Majesty the Queen is someone who has been able to serve our nation faithfully because of her faith in Jesus Christ. Perhaps there is no better way of celebrating her Platinum Jubilee than by doing the same ourselves."*<sup>iii</sup>

There's a thought for our community, for our nation, for our world, and for our Church to rally around. After the bunting comes down, we still need belonging. After the holiday weekend is

over, we still need hope. With the grind of work and responsibility returned, we still need a faith in something bigger than ourselves. On this Pentecost Sunday, the day of the Holy Spirit's inspiration, might God, again, be nudging us forward? Not filled with new wine, but filled with new hope, and determination to continue to change the world.

The inbreaking of the Spirit of God is not inebriation. It may be profoundly unsettling and deeply threatening to those who choose not to understand or enquire. But it propels us, inspires us, to keep talking, keep praying, keep trying, keep doing for as long as we live, whether our lives be short or long.

The idea of 'Jubilee' comes from the surprising Old Testament pages of Leviticus 25. In a Jubilee year you proclaim liberty for wage-slaves and return land acquisitions to ancestral owners. There's no mention of street parties, or processions (but there are trumpets). It's all about social justice and making our society more welcoming to the stranger, more inclusive to the marginalised, more community-minded, more compassionate towards widows and orphans and the poor and disadvantaged.

On Platinum Jubilee weekend, Pentecost Sunday, how are we doing?

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Acts 2:43-46

<sup>ii</sup> Her Majesty the Queen, Speech, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020

<sup>iii</sup> Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York, Platinum Jubilee sermon at St Paul's Cathedral, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2022