

Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> May 2020      *Pentecost*

**Acts 2: 1-21; John 20: 19-29**

Prayer:

Holy Spirit, life-giver, come to us today. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Good morning! If you've been following *Thy Kingdom Come* daily updates you may have watched a modern day version of how Pentecost might have been in Jerusalem, in the fantastic Pentecost party in Trafalgar Square, which took place last year. How long ago and far away that now seems...

But I begin with a more distant trip down memory lane.

Eight years ago on this festival day, we were in London, eagerly awaiting the Olympic Games! Then the Olympic flame landed on British soil, and it all became real as the torch relay began.

Pentecost 2012 was in the middle of this, when every day we heard updates on where the flame was, who'd seen it and carried it: I believe it was in Durham in mid-June. The 8000 torchbearers included ordinary locals, not just athletes and celebrities. And it was a gift for us preachers!

In our church, and I'm sure we weren't alone, we (well Nick!) made a cardboard gold torch which was passed round every member of the congregation in the opening hymn, reminding us of the flames of fire which rested on each person as the Holy Spirit came. And reminding us that **the Holy Spirit is for everyone.**

You may be wondering at this point why I'm talking about the Olympics which *aren't* going to happen this year? The Olympic flame reached Japan from Greece in early March, but was stopped in its tracks, and 'put in a safe place' until the relay can resume next year. Similarly, all athletes' training programmes have been paused and drastically re-scheduled.

Which is easy to say, but hides the enormity of loss experienced by athletes, coaches and fans around the world. 2020 will now be famous not for the Olympics but for a much less joyful global event. I know that's not the whole story, but as we become numbed to

creeping death totals, lets acknowledge the loss, fear and pain which this year has brought around the world.

Whereas, in 2012, we spoke about the Olympic torch imaging the flame of God's love freely shared, and how something kingdom-like was happening in London – people even started talking to each other on the tube - this year is very different. It's not just the Olympians but all of us, whose lives have been paused and drastically re-scheduled.

Nothing seems certain now, the pre-lockdown past a vanished age of innocence, the present a tentative experiment, and the future uncertain, full of questions.

But it's at exactly those moments that God, in the Bible and down through history, is there, is here, and speaking, if God's people will listen.

The passage Edward has just read, including all those place names- thank you- is all about **God communicating** with everyone who was in Jerusalem that morning, and we, the church, can 'track and trace', as they say these days, our very existence right back to that morning. Therefore, we too can expect God to be communicating with us, through the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God and of Jesus.

So I ask: **How is God communicating with us, or we might say speaking to us, today?**

When I say speak, it's not only about audible words. As we see in today's reading from Acts, God communicates in every possible way, through sight, sound, sense, touch, smell, feelings, and often more than one of these, to help us get the message!

And please note too that I said **How is God communicating with us**, not '*what*'. It's *how* because as Christians we all receive the Holy Spirit and we can all hear God for ourselves, and I have three *partial* answers- partial because I expect to spend the rest of my earthly life discovering more of how God communicates... these are just the main ones I see in today's passage. Three adverbs, for those who like grammar: **inclusively, personally, powerfully**. My apologies that only two begin with p.

Firstly, **God is speaking inclusively**- no one is left out. Acts 2 verse 1: They were all together in one place. They **all heard** the rushing wind, inside-, they **all saw** the flames resting on each person's head, and they were **all filled** with the Holy Spirit and **all began to speak** languages they didn't know. No exceptions, everyone. We may think the Holy

Spirit is only for super-Christians, or only for people who worship strangely, but it's clear here that God is communicating inclusively, giving his Spirit to everyone.

And whilst this is mind-blowing for us, for the Jews of Jesus' day it was really new. Before this, the Holy Spirit was given to certain people for specific reasons – prophets like Isaiah or Elijah, great leaders like Moses. But now, for the first time, *everyone's included* in the extravagant, outpouring of the Spirit, just as the prophet Joel foretold.

Further proof of this inclusivity comes in verse 6, because the multi-national crowd who hear them speaking understand what they're saying: they all hear God was speaking personally to them.

Which brings me to our second adverb- **personally**.

God's communication here, and to Christians ever since, including us, is **personal**. Well it is as long we are prepared to tune in and listen for ourselves.

Do you remember parties? Real, live ones, when people met together in one place – *close together*?

And when the volume made it necessary to really pay attention when you were chatting? D'you ever remember being so interested in what someone had to say that you moved to a quiet corner so you could hear better?

I think the Day of Pentecost was a bit like that.

And a bit like that party game where you have to find your partner through labels stuck on your backs, but at Pentecost it was through language: communication.

As people from the crowd tuned in to the disciples praising God, they each heard their mother tongue, that deeply personal love language which expresses who we are, and brings meaning. Then they paid closer attention, wanted to know more, moved in closer, pushed through the crowd until they'd found their partner, the one God was using to speak to them, through the Holy Spirit. It was those listeners who asked, 'What does this mean?' and who listened to Peter's answer – his sermon.

But, there were also those 'over the shoulder' party conversationalists, not listening, too busy looking at everyone else, hearing a great jumble of noise and *not* the voice speaking to them, missing the message of love in their native language, their mother-tongue.

And as one group moves in, the others are left standing on the edge, jeering, accusing the speakers of being drunk. The message is offered to them: they are included, personally, but they pull back and reject what seems irreverent, undignified or frightening. And perhaps some of us might have done the same.

**God communicates inclusively, personally, and thirdly, God communicates powerfully.**

Our reading ended before the end of Peter's sermon- which was longer than this one! Peter goes on to call his hearers to repent and believe in Christ's saving work, to be baptised and to receive the Holy Spirit. *For, he says, the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.*

About 3000 people welcomed the message that day and were baptised. Alleluia! When the Holy Spirit moves among us, our hearts and minds are changed and we take action- God communicates powerfully. The Holy Spirit is God the Communicator, who speaks to us inclusively, personally and powerfully.

3000 responded on the Day of Pentecost, but not all did.

But those pilgrims in Jerusalem would have travelled home to their various parts of the city, and other regions mixed together, the 'responders' and the sceptics. I think the newly baptised would have shared God's message again, all the way home.

That's not just wishful thinking, it's how we know God is, God never gives up on any of us, but keeps on communicating until we are ready to listen, and respond.

Finally, we began with the Olympics and the sense of loss, of hopes and dreams, plans and purpose. The Olympic flame locked up instead of touring Japan, it was going first to the areas where earthquake and tsunami hit 9 years ago. But the flame of God's Spirit can never be locked away or extinguished, and the longings for Hope, Love and Peace which the Olympics have come to symbolise are met fully and eternally only in God, who never stops communicating- inclusively, personally and powerfully- communicating in love with all his children. May we each receive from him all that he wants to give us, today.

Amen.