

Pentecost

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on the feast of Pentecost, Sunday 31 May 2020.

This was the first congregational worship since Sunday 15 March, when restrictions on physical gatherings were introduced because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Readings: Acts of the Apostles 2 vv 1-21 and John 20 vv 19-23

You are on the plane, and the doors are shut. The plane has pushed back from the gate. It has taxied along through the airport – that doesn't take long in Guernsey; but it can take ages at some of the big airports, and even at Gatwick. You are at the end of the runway, waiting for take-off. The engines are powered, and the plane picks up speed along the runway. The plane lifts off – and you are free of the constraints of the earth. Not quite as dramatic as the rocket lifting off from the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida yesterday evening, to take the astronauts to the International Space Centre which I could see clearly from my garden just a few nights ago. But powerful and liberating, none the less.

And does that blast of power that allows an aeroplane to take off, or sends a rocket into orbit, give us just a hint of the first day of Pentecost?

The story of the coming of the Holy Spirit in an almost visible form – but nevertheless a form that was very much experienced by the disciples – is one of the most dramatic stories in the New Testament. Ten days have passed since Jesus' ascension. Jesus had filled their lives with meaning, then had come the unbearable sorrow and bewilderment at his death, only to be replaced with the supreme joy and surprise of resurrection; and now he was no longer with them. He left them encouraged after his appearances, yes, but filled with longing for his actual presence. He also left them with a tender promise: 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you,' he said to them as recorded by John. 'And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high,' is how Jesus' words are recorded by Luke in his gospel.

Now, they are gathered together in one place in Jerusalem. Besides the eleven remaining disciples, and Matthias, newly chosen to take Judas' place, there are others who followed Jesus through his years of ministry – the ones who never abandoned him. So obviously there are many women among them. They are all in a state of waiting: they know their Scriptures and this time they will not make a mistake – after the resurrection, they know that they must believe in the promises.

They are together and they are waiting, probably praying in total silence, with a profound sense of anticipation. And it is at that point that their senses are invaded, assaulted: a violent wind makes a terrifying noise. Fire that is seen rushing toward one is equally terrifying: they see it like a divided tongue burning on other people's heads.

But this time they are not afraid. They look at each other and they laugh with a delight that breaks forth in uncontrollable babbling. They pour out of the house because they have something to say – aloud, and in a manner understood by others, no matter what language they speak at home. It's a delirious moment. It cannot be contained. It must be shared; otherwise how can they possibly believe that they are not dreaming?

The streets fill with their sounds until strangers think them drunk. Peter, the man who had denied his best friend in the most critical moments of his life, that Peter is

unrecognizable now. He must be laughing as he says, 'How can they be drunk at nine o'clock in the morning?' He is filled with words – the words of the prophets. He sees so many different kinds of people in front of him that he strives to address all of them.

The resurrected Christ is not a possession of some but a gift to all! The wondrous drama of the day continues with miracles: the miracle of language understood by all; the miracle of Peter's ability to rise above his humble Galilean accent and upbringing; the miracle of hearts being touched and changed. What a dramatic day, that day of the coming of the Comforter, that day of understanding.

As Pentecost was an event of international significance and meaning, as indicated by the languages mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, so we are conscious both of the narrowing of our horizons over the last two months, with an intense concern for one another in Guernsey, and of that same concern for people in other parts of the British Isles and the wider world who are still very much in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. That our borders are closed, to all intents and purposes, keeps us safe. Yet at the same time, that necessary decision keeps us away from family and friends. Electronic communication has been wonderful, but we know that it is not the same as physical contact. It is so good to *see* you today.

You may remember my last sermon at the 10 am service in St Andrew's church. No? Well, I was speaking about the importance of our care for the environment – for the world God has entrusted to us.

I said this: 'It is we who mar the ideal presented in Genesis. If we try to usurp the position of God, and to use or misuse God's creation in the ways we choose, then we certainly have the free choice so to do. Our ancestors have always been ready to exercise this free will – sometimes far too ready to exercise it. But the consequences of this are all around us: we bring disorder, uncertainty and alienation into the world because on our own, if we rely on ourselves and not on God, we do not have the wisdom and the knowledge and power to sustain and understand the world. And we seem to be less attuned to the needs of the earth than our ancestors. This is a salutary challenge to our pride and our self-confidence.'

We have had a new appreciation of the beauty of Guernsey over recent weeks. Thanks to the silence, we have enjoyed bird song as never before. The warmth and sunshine have allowed those of us fortunate to have such spaces to appreciate the beauty and scents of our gardens, as well as the unfolding beauty of the island as spring gives way to summer.

The Covid-19 pandemic is far from over. We have much to learn and digest. But if we take from this experience a new understanding of our part in the whole of humanity and a renewed commitment to protecting the world God has entrusted to us, perhaps we can experience a new Pentecost.

May we all feel God's holy breath on us today.