

King's College, Pentecost 2018

I read recently that the New Testament gives account of twenty-seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. One of these is martyrdom. The writer solemnly wrote that this gift could only be exercised once. This is true if we confine martyrdom to the sacrifice of one's life for the gospel. Tradition has it that all those upon whom the risen Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit did eventually make that sacrifice. Yet this was not, in itself, what Jesus gave them the Spirit for. He came into that locked room which was saturated with fear, bewilderment and confusion, and breathed his love into them forever. In the midst of their fear, he gave them his shalom, and made them part of his new creation. In their terror of violence, he gave them the power of the Spirit to be agents of his mercy.

If you like, the Incarnation teaches us that God is with us. The Cross teaches us that God is for us. Now Pentecost teaches us that God is in us. God is in us, and is empowering us to be praying witnesses to the language of his saving love that knows no barriers. God will not be confined to any one language and so transcends it. Suddenly, the words we are using are one and the same. And this is not an erasure – it is not a homogenous system imposed by an empire on another people. Rather, it is a wide-open embrace – God meeting us, exactly where we are.

And in this way that God meets us, language seems particularly significant. Bill Bryson wrote an insightful and amusing book called *Mother Tongue* about the English language. We say this about our primary language not just because language is learned from our parents, but also because there is something about language and the culture it perpetuates that is deep-down with regard to our identity. It connects us to all our forebears.

When I was a small boy, my Irish grandmother was always reminding me that I was really Irish. Interestingly, she was also the adult who taught me how to pray. As a child I thought that I ought to pray to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in an Irish accent. Many years later, long after Granny had died, I went to the Republic of Ireland for the first time. I had heard my grandmother speak phrases of the Irish language. In a family farmhouse in Kilkenny I first heard the language of my grandmother's people. I heard it all at once, strung together in sentences, vowels cascading over each other in ways that sounded rich and full-bodied. I had only ever heard pieces before – like the drips from a kitchen tap, and all of a sudden I was swimming in a metaphorical Irish Sea that enveloped me. Something in me was soothed, and at peace. Something in me was connected. The rough and tumble of my family life made sense in the stormy nature of that particular stretch of sea!

On the Day of Pentecost, reported in the Book of Acts, people gathered in Jerusalem from all corners of the Roman Empire. They represented a range of economic contexts and classes, diverse cultures, a myriad of languages and different religious traditions. Nevertheless, God's grace was given freely to all who heard the message preached by St. Peter, and many converted to Christ. Foreigners were incorporated into a shared eternal home. Those who converged on Jerusalem returned to their families and spread the language of love and healing spoken from the Cross. No wonder that the Church began to spread like wildfire, especially among slaves, women and other excluded people. It was in the midst of this great diversity that God sent the Holy Spirit upon his church and started a movement that would change the history of the world forever. In the fourth century, St. Basil wrote: "Through the Holy Spirit we are restored to paradise, led back to the Kingdom of heaven,

and adopted as children, given confidence to call God 'Father' and to share in Christ's grace, called children of light and given a share in eternal glory."

Jesus promised his disciples that he would send the Holy Spirit whose fruits are love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness and self-control. This fruit of the Spirit are the qualities of Jesus that the Holy Spirit develops in our lives as we grow in our faith. That's who we are and who we are to become as Christians. We are all unique translations of the gospel of love. Although early Christianity largely took over many of the ethical presumptions of the classical world, it was radically different in at least two respects: the aristocratic ethics of Aristotle are dramatically democratized by a Christian ethic based on the love of Christ for all without boundary of race, language, class or gender. The expectation of violence and inequality is challenged by the gospel expectation of mercy.

In our reading from the Gospel Jesus gives his disciples and all followers to come his peace. This is a huge gift. It is not just the hope of peace among nations and within communities, it is the whole of salvation. It is the wholeness of the *Shalom* which is set out in the Hebrew Bible and fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the whole language of salvation in one word. When I last left Israel, a young conscript Israeli soldier armed with a machine pistol wished me *Shalom*. This brought home to me more than anything else before what it means for us radically to live and serve the wholeness of God's love. Jesus reminds them that he has been their *Paraclete* up to now, the one with authority who has stood by them. He now offers them as he goes to his Father another Paraclete who will not only lead them into all truth, but also be their Comforter. Paradoxically, this is not a comforter to make them

comfortable. The patron of the Bayeux Tapestry setting out the events of the Battle of Hastings in 1066 was Odo, Bishop of Bayeux and brother of William the Conqueror. When the commentary on the fringe of the tapestry says that Bishop Odo comforted his troops, he is actually prodding them with his spear. They have reason to be in fear and awe at the cost of being a witness should be for each of us. In this Baptism and Confirmation, our candidates are reminded that God calls them by name and makes them his own. The truth of this compels us, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbour as ourselves. One way we do this is by reaching out to the unloved, the hard to love, and the rejected in our midst and loving them. As we confront a culture of 'them and us' and a society in which hate crime is growing; as we plan to turn away most refugees, and seem to be determined to set up barriers which had been broken down; and as we have our hearts hardened by politicians and the media - we are drawn by the Spirit to the Christ who went to the Cross refusing to be defined over against anyone.

That is a tall order to fulfil, but not an impossibility for those of us who allow the indwelling Holy Spirit to work in us. The world-wide novena of prayer between Ascension Day and today, 'Thy Kingdom Come', is the invitation to be those people who pray that we may be agents of the transformation of the world in Christ. In his shalom, in his gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus creates a community of love out of confusion and chaos. The Jesus Movement is a movement of forgiveness: we are people of forgiveness if we live Jesus as well as talk Jesus. Imagine a world shaped by forgiveness. Imagine how you and I might be changed were we to grasp that the challenge is not God withholding his mercy, but our reluctance to give up the sclerosis of sin and embrace new life.

I can make this claim only because we are here celebrating the Eucharist together. A few years ago I began a conversation with the parishes and schools of the Diocese of Ely under the heading, *Imagining the Future*. I received a lot of feedback from children. My favourite was a contribution from a well-schooled nine-year-old girl. She told me that we all had to remember that we come into church and see the font where our life in Christ begins in the water of life. We then walk up the nave, God's backbone, and we come to the altar, which is God's heart. Every time we who are baptized into the Body of Christ approach the altar, we are reminded of God's love for us and find God's heart. It is around the holy table, gathered with our brothers and sisters in Christ, that God graciously accepts us as living members of his own Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, and feeds us with spiritual food in the blessed Sacrament.

As our barriers are broken down, we must hold onto the promise of God, "Peace I give to you – my peace I leave with you." When our barriers and limitations are embraced – swimming in the ocean of God's love, feeling as if we have finally come home.