

## **Bishop Emma Sermon for Pentecost 31st May 2020.**

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2.1-4)

Language is important. Before I wore a dog collar, I taught and studied language. One of my early jobs was for a company that produced dictionaries! And one of the things I know from that is that words - language - and the way we use it, forms and shapes the way we see the world around us. Some words give great insight into the cultures they emerge from.

For instance, did you know there is a Japanese word for the way sunlight filters through the leaves of the trees? Or that there's a Finnish word for the distance a reindeer can travel before needing a rest? Like the Italian word for being moved to tears by a good story, or the Swedish word for a third cup of coffee.

Language is powerful. You only have to take a brief look at the pages of the Bible to see how powerful language can be: God created the world by speaking it into being. Let there be ... he said. And there was. All through the Bible the Word of the Lord does things, not just says things:

Psalm 107: "He sent forth his word and healed them."

Psalm 147 "He hurls down his hail like pebbles. Who can withstand his icy blast? He sends his word and melts them." (Sounds like Cumbrian weather!)

So God's words are powerful. And then God sent his own son Jesus he wasn't called The Idea, or the Concept or the Thought, but The Word made flesh.

Language does things, you see. Recently, around the commemorations for VE Day the BBC showed again one of my favourite films, *The Darkest Hour* about Winston Churchill, played by Gary Oldman, in his early days as Prime Minister during the second world war. In fact it's a film all about words and the power of words to change the course of history. The film depicts Churchill wrestling with how to express things in his speeches in order to inspire and change the hearts British people. One of my favourite moments is towards the end of the film when Churchill delivers his rousing 'we shall fight them on the beaches' speech in parliament after which Lord Halifax turns to his neighbour and says "he has mobilised the English language and sent it into battle'."

Through history language has been used to change the world, for both good and ill. Language has been used to identify people, to mark out boundaries, to oppress some and liberate others.

My family is from Wales. There was a time there in the 19th c. when it was forbidden to speak Welsh in schools. If you were caught doing so, a shaming sign was put around your neck saying "Welsh not" because English was seen as the 'proper' language for education. The negative effects of that policy continue in some parts of Wales even today. So language can destroy as well as build up, alienate as well as reconcile, tear down as well as gather up, mislead as well as inspire.

So I wonder what God was up to that first Pentecost when a sign of God's coming Holy Spirit was that people spoke in different languages? Let's think about it, those first disciples had been through a traumatic event - they'd seen Jesus crucified, and they'd rejoiced at his resurrection, they'd witnessed his ascension, and there they were - in an upper room in the city of Jerusalem - waiting until lockdown was lifted. And on that day all God's ancient prophecies were fulfilled and down came the fire of the Holy Spirit with a loud sound, which filled the entire house. Not surprisingly people gathered to see what was going on - well you would wouldn't you? They were people from all over the world and from different cultures, some of them visitors to the city who found themselves addressed in their own languages!

*"Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?"*

There's a long list of the languages they suddenly began to speak, in Acts 2: the languages of the Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene; Immigrants from Rome, both Jews and converts; people from Crete and those who spoke Arabic. All of them said: *"They're speaking our languages, describing God's deeds of power"* Someone has said that the real miracle of Pentecost is not so much a miracle of speaking, but a miracle of hearing, that the Good News was heard and understood in the mother tongue of each one who gathered that day.

And from that point the Christians went out and spoke boldly about God's deeds. They saw him change and transform individual lives and communities, bringing hope, healing and wholeness.

But have you ever wondered why they spoke so many different languages? If you think about it, if God had just wanted the people gathered around to understand what was being said, why didn't he simply make everyone speak and understand the *same* language? Why all the *different* languages? One of the things that Pentecost tells us is that the new community of the Spirit - that now we call the church - involves everyone and transcends barriers of race, nationality and language. *Everyone* hears God's works spoken of in their *own* language. That's significant. When God comes with his Holy Spirit to set the church on fire, he doesn't call us each to speak in the same way or with the same language or to do church in the same way, or to like the same things or be exactly the same as each other. The story of Pentecost tells us that everyone is welcome whatever language you speak, wherever you're from, whatever your story.

The church in Cumbria has not been closed for the past 8 weeks, but it has been different. There has been a multicoloured variety in the ways the church has expressed its faith - in online service, in dial up prayers, in videos and zoom meetings, in community-building and small acts of kindness, in neighbours caring for each other, and food banks providing for those who are struggling, in prayers and appreciation for key workers. In all these ways we have seen God at work.

But now, as we begin to think in due course about opening up our church buildings and shooing away the pigeons and cranking up the church organs and dusting off the bells, I would love to see our church keep hold of the variety and creativity we've found in these days, and the connections we have made between church and home, sacred and secular, spirituality and everyday life. Acts 2 tells us the earliest churches met in homes and in the public worship spaces - and both are important.

So, this Pentecost, let's receive again, the Holy Spirit of God who Jesus has breathed on us while we've been in lockdown.

We need that Holy Spirit - to fill all our our communications, and to help us to speak boldly of the Good News of Jesus - in Carlisle and Kendal and Barrow and Workington and in the Lakes and on our streets, and in our towns and villages and our communities and to the ends of the earth. And to do that we will need the language each of us speaks. Possibly not Mesopotamian, Judean, and Cappadocian (although you never know!), or Welsh or French (although maybe), but the languages of city and country, the language of commerce and of law, the language of politics, teaching and medicine, the language of care homes and farming and tourism, the language of administration, parenting, the languages of music, sport and industry. We need everyone - and all of our languages and ways of speaking so that everyone will hear of the marvellous deeds of God who lives and loves and sends and equips and comforts and heals.

When God promises "*I will pour out my Spirit on all people*", this is not just a trickle on a few people. God wants to open the floodgates of heaven upon all of us. God will empower us and give us what we need. More than we need. So let's ask God to fill us again today with his Spirit's fire, and let's live differently tomorrow because of it.

Rise up church in Cumbria. You have been filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit of God to speak boldly, in many tongues, about God's marvellous deeds. What began at Pentecost continues - here - today. God calls us to join with him in mobilising all of our different lives, fired and inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit to change the world - one life at a time.

I invite you wherever you are to put out your hands a pray that ancient prayer: 'Come Holy Spirit'.

***Come Holy Spirit of God. Fill your church - in Cumbria and beyond - with your power from on high. Amen.***