

The Feast of Pentecost, 27 May 2023  
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR  
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the Name of the Holy Spirit, source of all life and love. Amen.

Welcome to the Feast of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church.

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus was preaching and teaching and healing. People listened and learned, were healed and blessed, but even when he sent the disciples out, Jesus remained the center of the action. God in Christ was active among humans, but the humans themselves were largely recipients of the action. They followed and watched, listened and learned, were healed and blessed.

In the first two chapters of Acts we see the shift in the action from what we have seen throughout the Gospels. Jesus finishes his teaching and blessing and then disappears from the earthly scene. He has breathed his spirit onto his disciples and talked about sending them out, but once he leaves them, the band of faithful followers don't in fact 'go out'. They remain holed up together, praying and waiting. They have not yet taken the reins to carry on.

Today everything changes. Today is Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, in Greek 'Pentecost'. It is the 50<sup>th</sup> day since Pesach, Passover. Shavuot is a major festival of the Israelite religion on which Jews from throughout Palestine and the Jewish diaspora around the Mediterranean all hoped to be in Jerusalem so that they can be part of the Temple prayers and sacrifices in thanksgiving for God's gift of the Devarim, the 10 Words to Moses on Mount Sinai, establishing the divine covenant with the chosen people, showing them how to live as God's people in the world.

The streets and squares are crowded and noisy, but the small faithful band of Jesus' followers is still in their rented room, praying and wondering what will be next. They do not seem to have had any plans to take an active part in the great festival.

But then something happens. What exactly occurred is not entirely clear, but it was loud enough to catch everyone's attention, all the pilgrims in town for the festivities and the local population, as well as Jesus' family and followers still hiding out in prayer. Whatever happened brought them out of their hiding.

Everyone heard the loud noise; some described seeing what looked like flames above the heads of the those who came out of their room of prayer. Some people accused the fishermen and their friends of being drunk, probably not an unusual thing at a big festival. But what they experienced was nothing like being drunk.

Whereas they had been hiding out and more or less holding their collective breath, suddenly they found themselves bursting with enthusiasm to tell anyone and everyone about their experiences. They burst forth from their room and talked to anyone they found in the crowded streets. What was remarkable was that everyone noticed that they could all understand these enthusiastic people, apparently uneducated working people. It is not that they spoke clearly and eloquently, but that each listener understood each speaker in their own native tongue. So the merchant from Rome heard someone speaking Latin; the poet from Athens heard them in Greek; each heard them clearly in the language of each. It was a miracle of communication.

At diocesan convention and other such occasions we often invite people to join in the Lord's Prayer in 'the language of your heart', meaning the language that you most fully and completely understand and in which you feel best able to make yourself understood, your home language. This may be your first language, or the one you spoke in the country where you spent your school years, or the language of your adopted family. Many of us have had the experience of being somewhere far from home immersed in a sea of unfamiliar sound, as people around us are speaking languages we do not know then suddenly catching the sound of our own heart language. It is a visceral feeling of connection. That is what happened that Pentecost day in Jerusalem for thousands of people.

People from all over, speaking many different, unrelated languages, each heard the stories about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in the language they best understood, so that what they heard was not mere words, but whole ideas. Everyone was surprised and confused – but many were transformed. On that day the small band of about 120 followers of Jesus swelled by some 3000, as people heard the tales of the disciples and found their hearts changed.

Before his Ascension, Jesus promised that God would send another Comforter, another strengthener to the faithful to give them what they would need to go out doing Christ's work everywhere in the world, to the ends of the earth. That is what is happening.

The Holy Spirit, the Ruach that breathed life into the world and that continues to sustain and heal and build and invite, came bursting into Jerusalem and enabled heart to heart connection between people with nothing in common except a desire to be faithful to God. This noisy gift of the Spirit enabled ordinary people whose life work might previously have not had much to do with persuasive talking to suddenly find themselves able to tell their own experiences with Jesus in ways so vivid and convincing that it transformed the hearts of the people they spoke to,

There is no evidence that this gift of speaking just the right language was a permanent transformation. Presumably, those who previously spoke only their own local dialect of Aramaic went back to that; those who spoke

Aramaic and Greek and Latin went back to that. The permanent transformation for the disciples was the turning outwards. God's spirit gave them the courage to speak and persuade, to invite people into their relationship with God. Together, the first disciples of Jesus and the new converts, became the Followers of the Way, what we eventually came to call the Church, the community of faithful followers of Christ.

Before that Pentecost Day, the body of the faithful was just the people who had followed Jesus during his ministry and remained faithful through the crucifixion, a small specific group bound by common experience. After Pentecost, that number was swelled by daily converts who heard what had happened in the language of their hearts and found their hearts and lives transformed.

This is new, a new community which includes people from foreign cultures and traditions as well as people born into the Hebrew Covenant. This is a community of people touched by the Spirit of God with an invitation to be part of the work of blessing the whole world.

This is a community called to live out God's love for the whole entire world, to bring the blessing and healing to 'every creature under heaven'. This is the Church, God's people invited to become Christ's hands and feet and voice throughout the world.

The church has always been composed of flawed humans, so there is never perfect love and perfect blessing and inclusion. But that is what the Spirit is inviting us into, always.

And today is the birthday of that new thing, that manifestation of the work of God's spirit in human community. And so it is especially appropriate to celebrate, with chili representing the flames of the first Pentecost or cake representing the birth of a whole new way of being children of God, for every tribe and language, and people and nation.

It feels particularly appropriate that yesterday was the Feast of Augustine of Canterbury, the first Archbishop of Canterbury who was sent from Rome in the 6<sup>th</sup> century to bring the people of Britain into Christ's Church. Augustine was afraid of this posting to a strange land full of people of strange language and customs, but he accepted the challenge and took with him a manuscript of the Gospels, the stories that those with the tongues of flame told the pilgrims in Jerusalem, the stories of Jesus. And that Gospel book which began the conversion of the English people is still in Canterbury, still kissed by each successor to the chair at Canterbury, the leader of our Anglican Communion. For me this vividly represents that heart to heart connection and transformation that happens when the Gospel is shared. The current Archbishop of Canterbury was consecrated with the laying on of hands by those who had hands laid on them, generation after generation, in an unbroken chain going back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century in Britain and beyond that to the apostles, those on whom God's Spirit came on Pentecost. Just as that same book is still at Canterbury, touched by each of the 104 archbishops, the same spirit passes from person to person, hand to head, heart to heart giving life to the church, Christ's hands and heart and voice for the world.

So, Happy birthday, Church, the living heart of Christ in the world.

Now I will conclude with a prayer by the extraordinarily gifted Hildegard von Bingen, advisor to popes and cardinals and politicians, scientist, composer, founder of monasteries, and gifted poet. She was clearly deeply acquainted with the Spirit of God which infuses all things and has helped others find their way to perceiving it for the more than 8 centuries. This is one of my favorite prayers and one of three Pentecost pieces on today's handout.

Fiery Spirit, fount of courage,  
Life within life of all that has being!  
O sacred breath, O blazing love, O savor in the breath  
And balm flooding the heart with the fragrance of good.  
O limpid mirror of God  
Who leads wanderers home and hunts out the lost,  
O current of power permeating all—  
In the heights, upon the earth and in all deeps:  
You bind and gather all people together.  
Be with us today.  
Out of you clouds come streaming,  
Winds take wing from you, dashing rain against stone;  
And ever-fresh springs well from you, washing the evergreen globe.  
O teacher of those who know,  
A joy to the wise is the breath of wisdom.  
Praise then be yours!  
You are the song of praise, the delight of life,  
A hope and a potent honor granting garlands of light.  
We praise you and beg your presence now and always. Amen.