

Fr Tim's Sermon – Sunday 5th June 2022

Pentecost

Readings:

Acts 2: 1-21

John 14: 8-17

It's now fifty days since Easter. And what a fifty days they've been!

Just think about the journey we've been through. Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, early in the morning, in the quiet and the darkness. He appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and was recognised in the breaking of the bread. He appeared to the eleven apostles, or rather, to ten of them, as Thomas wasn't there! Thomas, doubting Thomas, then saw Jesus for himself.

He appeared at the side of the lake, and Peter and his friends who had caught nothing all night, suddenly caught the biggest catch ever. All over the place, Jesus showed himself to those who were ready to hear, and to see.

Suddenly, the end – Jesus' hanging on a cross – was no longer the end. Perhaps that was just a part in the story, after all, without death there could be no resurrection. Perhaps this was a new beginning – Jesus is alive – Alleluia! Even after death, Jesus continues to be with those who come to him, and to help them on their way.

And then, ten days ago, we celebrated the feast of the Ascension. Once again, Jesus is gone. He has died, he has been raised, he is back among us, and we shout Alleluia. And then he is gone again. But haven't we learnt yet, that he doesn't leave us. We thought he'd left us the first time, and he came back. It would be foolish to think that he'd left us this time. Is this another end? Do we look for another beginning? What happens next?

Well, in many ways, a new beginning was exactly what the Jews had been looking for since before Jesus' ministry began. They saw themselves as the generation for whom all the prophecy which they read in Scripture would come true. After all, Daniel had spoken of an exile that would last for four hundred and ninety years, beginning in Babylon. Well, the Babylonian exile had taken place, somewhere between 400 and 500 years ago, they now lived in a country, not in exile, but ruled over by Romans, and so the time must be right for the new start that was promised by the prophets.

Perhaps that's why Jesus aroused quite so much attention. Perhaps the Jews were really interested because they knew that something was expected, but perhaps weren't quite sure what. Perhaps for all those who questioned and criticised Jesus, they were trying to fit him into the box, to make him what they wanted him to be, so that they could believe that he heralded a new age, a new dawn, a new start, and everything was about to be put right.

Fifty days later, what did people think? An end, Jesus on the cross. A new start, He is risen indeed. An end, he has ascended into heaven. And today, a new start. And what a start. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit Jesus promised any number of times, is here. It has come upon the disciples, and just listen to them.

What are we listening to? In one sense, we're listening to the fact that they are speaking in other languages that they hadn't spoken in before. That is pretty impressive, let's be honest. In another sense, we're listening to the fact that every person gathered there, from every place they have come, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, and all the others (I don't want to try and live up to XXX's wonderful rendition of them all!), can all hear the disciples speak, and understand it in their own language. That also is beyond impressive, that is quite incredible. Something is happening here today.

But perhaps the most significant thing, the one thing that makes this most amazing of all isn't who heard what, but what was said. The crowd are all there, and wondering what's going on. Some were asking each other: "What does this mean", while others had taken the obvious route and assumed that the disciples were drunk!

But Peter, the rock of the church, the foundation of our faith, stood up and began to talk. "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem – listen to me!". I'm not drunk, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning – not that that would stop people these days, but he's making sense. Those of you who think I'm drunk, think again, think logically, look, and listen.

And then he goes on to show that he, Peter, the one who has denied Jesus, the one who has got it wrong and misunderstood Jesus so many times, has changed. The Holy Spirit is upon him, and now is his moment, his opportunity not to get it wrong, his opportunity not to make a fool of himself, his opportunity to get it absolutely right, and to show that his Lord, his Master, Jesus Christ, lives on in him through this Spirit.

He quotes the prophecy of Joel. He shows that he knows his Scripture. He shows that the day Joel spoke of has come. In these last days, God declared, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh. The day has come. We're living in the last days.

We've been living in the last days ever since. The last days could be said to have been going on for some considerable time now. But these are powerful days. Until Jesus came into the world, God made man, humanity did not understand the love of God. Until Jesus was raised to new life at the first Easter, humanity didn't understand the power of God. Until Pentecost, and the realisation that without Jesus present in the world, Jesus lives on through his Spirit, humanity didn't understand the nature of God.

Love, power and nature. Now we know. And now that we know these things, we are living in the end times. There is nothing more to be revealed. We know all that we can know, and it's up to us to respond. Jesus' call to us is to respond as St Peter did, filled with the Holy Spirit, and ready to carry on his work, bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to all people in all places, in their own language and culture, making his presence known, and sharing his love, his power and his nature.

Is that us? Can we do that? Perhaps we should ask, is that Peter? Can he do that? Was there a more unlikely person to begin this ministry? The one who was told he would deny Jesus, promised that he wouldn't, and then did it anyway! The one who was told off more often than any other disciples for his misunderstanding and human weakness. And the answer is of course, yes, when he was filled with the Holy Spirit, he could do anything that God called him to, and he could do it well.

That is our call. We are the Peters of our day. We are the ones who can do all that Jesus calls us to, when we open our hearts to his Spirit, and follow his call. And when we do this, we live in the hope of the Christian Gospel, the hope of eternal life, and the hope that in all we do, we may walk closer with Jesus Christ each and every day of our lives.

It would be very wrong not to recognise today that this is not only the feast of Pentecost, but also the final day of a long weekend of celebration, as we recognise the remarkable service of seventy years of the reign of our Queen. I will say more about this this evening, when we celebrate her reign in a service of Choral Evensong, but Queen Elizabeth's reign does help us illustrate the point of the feast of Pentecost, and so I will leave the final words this morning to her, from her Christmas message in 2002:

I know just how much I rely on my faith to guide me through the good times and the bad. Each day is a new beginning. I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to give of my best in all that the day brings, and to put my trust in God.