**20th May 2018**

**Pentecost Sunday**

**Acts 2.1-21, Romans 8.22-27**

Well, did you see the Royal Wedding yesterday? Weddings are always a day of hope, a day of new beginnings. And we wish Harry and Megan well. Their marriage broke with Royal convention in many ways. The most controversial aspect was the fact that she was from mixed race parentage.

There has always been a saying about blue blood – it had racist undertones suggesting that blue blood was pure royalty, not commoners, undiluted and white. The British Royal Family has always had a cross-border character (Germanic and Greek influences, for example), in the last half century it has evolved a much more open, accepting attitude to difference and class.

Contrast the controversy around Edward and Mrs. Simpson in the 1930s when the King abdicated in order to marry an American divorcee with the Anglo-US, black-white marriage celebrated so glamorously in Windsor this weekend. So, we thank God for this openness to accept difference and the other.

But old conventions of the Palace controlling the media and the information about the wedding has not worked. Ms. Markle's extended family - most of them with little left to lose as they haven't seen the bride for many a moon and have spent the wedding in TV studios rather than in St George's Chapel - have descended en masse on Britain, all with stories to tell and bank balances to improve. Her father has been off message, briefing media outlets in Mexico. The families of previous brides understood the rules, even if as so-called commoners they knew that a single narrative of the wedding would preserve the event.

And they knew that if they stepped out of line they would be out in the cold.

So, the previous reliance on the palace for titbits - that cake recipe, those flowers, that photographer - has vanished like dew on a spring morning. Every well-laid plan of the palace has been consumed by the soap-opera drama playing out well beyond its control. Communication has been confusing and chaotic and divisive.

Elsewhere in our world the old differences seem to prevent good relationships and communication.

North and South Korea and the USA vacillate, but is there baffling new hope emerging of disarmament and healthier togetherness?
Meanwhile, Iran's and Israel's mutual loathing raises the nuclear threat and has explosive results in Syria, as if she hasn't enough self-destructive jealousies of her own to deal with.

Israel allows its sense of difference and threat from those around her to excuse the shooting dead of almost sixty people at the border, and over 2000 have been injured. Hamas allow their sense of difference to excuse hateful rhetoric about tearing out Israeli hearts. [Each provokes the other to violent anger](https://www.channel4.com/news/bloodshed-at-gazas-border-dozens-killed-at-violent-protests.)in order to be able to say how horrible they are, ironically looking rather similar, though not dying in similar proportions.

Britain's treatment of migrant citizens still brings shame on our judgmental systems. It emerged this week that some 63 Windrush generation neighbours have been [wrongly detained and deported](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/windrush-latest-deportations-sajid-javid-citizens-right-stay-hostile-environment-a8352871.html).

In our society there is a tension between young and old, the old feeling marginalized and overlooked, the young feeling as the ones who have lost out in terms of pensions, housing, jobs.

Difference becomes an excuse for hatred and exploitation. Caricature is used politically to bolster the myth that difference is negative. The deepest tragedy is that our difference is a gift of the creative Spirit. Pentecost is a chance to re-evaluate our judgement of difference.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. And God created all things. At God's Word, the wind of the Spirit brought order out of chaos, something out of nothing; things and, climactically, people other than himself. The Spirit's gift is otherness. But we have let otherness become a threat.

Since Cain's jealousy and deep insecurity burned, we have struggled with the difference that is the Spirit's gift. Now, at the feast of Pentecost, an international gathering celebrating harvest ten days after Jesus' Ascension, fifty days after Passover or Easter (hence the word Pente (Latin meaning fifty) the wind of God moves again in a new way.

* The Spirit invigorates the disciples and makes them articulate and confident.
* The Spirit brings disorder in so far as she crosses our borders, hierarchies and falsely fixed categories.
* The Spirit brings people together, understanding one another's languages.
* The Spirt emphatically does not make everyone the same. This does not reverse Babel. It is much more exciting than that. All are still speaking different languages. What she does is enable people to imagine the world through each other's different eyes; to hear the world described in each other's languages.
* The Spirit accentuates difference and then helps us enjoy that difference.
* The Spirit chooses a festival about creation's abundant sustenance of life, so celebrating the otherness of all God's creatures and gifts, while challenging our unhealthy superior sense of otherness which has allowed us to abuse the rest of creation. (Indeed, Romans 8.22-3 again emphasizes the relationship between humanity and all creation sharing pain in their otherness and longing.)

The gospel reading from John we had last week – the end of chapter 15 and beginning of chapter 16 John shows that the Spirit convicts, which is to say reveals the truth about us wherever our perspective is distorted, and we slip back to an incorrect default setting of jealousy. The Spirit can always, as it were, re-boot us and restore the creator's settings of perception. Her presence reveals:

* Our distorted sense of sin, where we fixate on categories of good and bad deeds, competing over them, when sin is really about broken relationship with God, worked out in broken relationship with people different from ourselves. Jesus is particularly concerned to expose the irony that some who think they believe the most (the religious authorities) trust God the least.
* Our distorted sense of righteousness where our sense of goodness is dependent on others' failure and righteousness is all about respectable behaviour. Ascending, Jesus has taken all our human shame and sorrow to the heart of God for healing. Since we are given his Spirit, we need not see him again to continue sharing in his life of transforming difference from threat to blessing.
* Our distorted approach to judgement, where we allow resentment to govern the way we see others and constantly compete for superiority. God’s judgement does not conclude with a condemning sentence. God’s loving judgement is diagnosis before healing.

There is a risk of our mishearing John, as they help prepare the church for life without the physical presence of Jesus. We may hear them as dualist and exclusive, so much of the emphasis on belonging or not belonging, acceptance and rejection, the world hating you, you not belonging to the world. However, if we remember the context of John’s gospel of God making all things, loving all things, entering intimately into the world to save it out of love and the poignant tragedy of not being recognized (think John 3.16: for God so loved the world that….), then they sound rather different. And if we remember the vulnerability of the early church and its experience of persecution, then such language sounds much more about encouragement than exclusivity.

The sweep of the Gospel and letters is to hold on with confidence as people who have recognized him: to keep entering intimately into the world and its need, accepting that we will be unrecognized and rejected, but knowing we are abiding in the Spirit, which is to abide in Christ, which is to abide in the Father. The near-dualist language helps us hold together the experience of hatred - unhealthy difference – and at the same time love for the fallen world – healthy difference.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Part of our challenge for life in the Spirit is to discern whether we are being led by the Spirit of Jesus or the Spirit of the world. The Spirit of Jesus, literally the values and life and words and inspiration of Jesus impacting on our life – the spirit of Jesus is not to hate, not to discriminate, not to separate, not to feel superior and righteous but humble and a servant, reconciler and healer, to know you are loved and precious as a child of God.

If you read the IBRA Bible Notes, in today’s commentary on this passage from Acts Tim Yau writes about how he was flying to an international conference and was told on arrival he’d be picked up by a local driver. Entering the airport lobby, he was confronted with the confusion of handwritten signs being brandished at him and a myriad of voices vying for his attention, none of which he recognized or understood.

As he waited, all that activity and sound just became background noise. Unable to be distracted by the incomprehensible conversation and public-address announcements, his mind switched of. As the hours went by he started to daydream about what he’d do if the driver didn’t turn up. He felt a long way from home. Suddenly a voice broke through his mental fog asking him in English ‘Are you Tim?’ Hearing and understanding those three simple words meant he was known, and as saved from a hungry night alone, sleeping on a cold airport floor.

He writes: ‘*that voice was important to me that day. How much more significant is it that at Pentecost, God’s Spirit spoke to the people of the nations in their own language, not just for ease of communication, but to declare that they too were known by God, and included so that they could hear the message of true salvation and the wonders of God?’[[2]](#endnote-2)*

As we celebrate the coming of the Spirit today, do you need to hear again the Spirit communicating to you that are loved, known and included by God?

Do you need to be anointed by the Spirit to be taken up in the mission of God to break down barriers, cross boundaries?

Do you need to be invigorated with new boldness and confidence in the salvation and wonders of God and the gift of prophecy to tell and discern of what God is doing and wants to do in our lives and the life of the world?

In times of tension and conflict when differences are seen as a threat not a blessing – do you need the work of the Spirit in your life to challenge and comfort, to transform and change you to be conformed into the image of Christ, the one who brings people together, to have his ministry of reconciliation?

The power of the Spirit is poured on those who are praying for God to use them.

The preacher at Harry and Megan’s wedding yesterday was Bishop Michael Curry, from the Episcopalian Church in the US. In these ten days of ecumenical initiative, between Ascension and Pentecost, to call people to prayer Thy Kingdom Come and to pray for God’s Spirit to change people’s lives and the life of our nation, Bishop Michael shared a story which I posted on the Tab’s Facebook page.[[3]](#endnote-3) He said he knew he grew up in Buffalo New York state. There was a woman in the church he attended as a church who was known as Aunty Ruth. Back in the 1940s her house had caught fire and she was seriously injured. She had to have both her legs amputated. The priest visited her in hospital and helped her talk about this tragedy and her struggle to come to terms with it. She confessed that she was so upset she wanted to end her life and give up. But as the support from her priest continued she made a pledge that if God helped her have her legs back in some way she would serve Him for the rest of her life. Soon after they were able to fit her with two prosthetic legs which enabled her to walk with the help of crutches. She became a loving prayerful presence in the church and oved making the coffee after worship and serving others through hospitality. She also loved to needle work and made robes and vestments for children who served at the altar. Bishop Michael Curry was one of them. Both he and six other children would go on to become priests. The day bishop Michael was ordained she told him that God had answered her prayers. ‘Wherever you go I go’. She said. ‘Your legs are my legs and God has answered my prayer’.

Bishop Michael concluded by saying that God’s will and dream is released in our time. He had seen it in Aunty Ruth.

We have the opportunity to co-operate with God and the working of his spirit to realize God’s will and dream of a restored creation, people at ease with each other, loved, known and included.

May God pour out his Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, and bring us all to that great salvation in Christ.

1. David Warbrick, Roots Material May 2018 <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2018/95-may-june-2018-b/pentecost/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Tim Yau IBRA Notes Fresh from the Word 2018 p141 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfQ9OHJwGxM&feature=share> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)