

Those of you who were here last week will remember that I advertised the Borough of Brent ecumenical Pentecost celebration which took place on Friday night. It is an annual event organised by the Borough Deans and has for the last few years been hosted by Park Lane Methodist Church in Wembley. It is a strange service – choirs from different traditions, a speaker – each year from a different church – and of course prayer and singing.

Many of you aptly observed that I didn't sell it well, as I described it as a bit like going to a school concert – and it is! But as I sat there on Friday night, and worshiped with people I knew and many I didn't – with all our different traditions and expectations – I was struck that even in all our strangeness we are drawn together by our shared love of God. But like at a school play, when you are watching your own children perform – you can only see the performance with eyes of pride – I realised I had the same experience. Not all the music or stories might have been my thing – but you know I felt such a warmth that with all that is going on in the world we can all come together and share our love for God, and hold our hopes together – we can even work together and even flourish because of each other!

The Harlesden Methodists Men's Choir have sung at this event every time I have attended. They are always my favourite part of the evening. I suspect the average age of the choir is mid 70's; and it is clear they have been singing in church all their lives. They always start a little shaky – because they are used to singing in church and not in front of an audience – but as they continue to always get stronger and more confident. But what I love about them is that it is obvious that their singing reflects their faith – they always sing an older hymn – one that connects with their story – and again on Friday night I was moved by their love of God and of each other.

The thing about an ecumenical service like this is, it is a bit messy – just like faith – just like life – just like the church – and often that messy-ness is a bit of a challenge. And its essence that is the message of Pentecost. If the disciples thought that the coming of the promised Holy Spirit was going to make things easier – they missed the point! The Holy Spirit doesn't remove the disciples from challenges and hardships, but rather equips them to persevere, even flourish, amid them. This seems, on the most part, to be the unified witness across the New Testament about the Spirit's work.

In John, for instance, (as we reflected last week) the disciples are hiding in the upper room out of fear that those who crucified Jesus may come after them. And what does Jesus do as he breathes the Holy Spirit upon them? He doesn't take them away from Jerusalem or fortify the room in which they're hiding, but instead he sends them out into that dangerous world: "As the Father sent me, so I now send you" (20:21), and then he gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit to create in them the courage they will need to follow Jesus' command.

Similarly in Acts, the disciples are waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit and, once it comes, they go out to proclaim the good news to people they had good reason to believe would be at least sceptical if not outright hostile to their message.

Again in Paul, the Spirit is given to enable individual believers to look beyond their individual needs, hopes, or fears and equip them with distinct gifts, all in order to work together for the “common good” (1 Cor. 12:7).¹

The spirit inspires and unsettles – but it also provides us with the strength to face all that is before us.

I don't know about you, but at present I feel very unsettled. As I was going to bed last night the news of another attack, this time on London Bridge and around Borough Market was filtering through. More violence, and violence that is hard to protect against because the weapons are everyday things – cars and knives. In comes on top of the endless news this week of attacks in Afghanistan, Bagdad, Egypt, in Mosul ... and the list goes on. Like the Psalmist I want to cry out ‘why God, why!’ And on a weekend when we celebrate the power of God's Holy Spirit, surely we can find God in our midst. As we were reminded last week – the disciples too knew what it was like to be under siege, and fearful – and to be misrepresented. We need to remember this in the way that we respond.

So often the spirit can be seen as a personal or even individual thing, but that was not the case at Pentecost nor is it the case now! We need to recognize that while we may often hope that God will remove us from challenging or difficult situations, God often instead comes along side of us in the presence of the Holy Spirit in order to strengthen and equip us to endure, and even to flourish, amid these challenges and difficulties. Why? Perhaps because God may actually be working through us for the common good, to care for the need of our neighbours, community, and world. We have a purpose: to care for those around us as God cares for us, to make wherever we may find ourselves a better place, to share God's love in word and deed that others may know they are not alone and, indeed, are loved. We are here, that is, not simply for ourselves but for those around us². And in a sense the Borough Pentecost service highlighted this for me about the nature of how we are church; but it will be also evident in the way we respond to the events of last night too.

In a week when we will all vote for the common good of our nation we may do well to remember this too. However we vote this week – and vote we must – we need to do it in mind of God's spirit in our midst – reading the propaganda and manifesto's of each candidate prayerfully – and seeking God's guidance for our nation and for the good of the world.

As we come to the feast of Pentecost today, God invites us to be unsettled and challenged by how the spirit is guiding us – but also in the same way that many

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/05/pentecost-a-with-not-from/>

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were able to hear the message of good news in their own language – so we too need to ensure that we are inclusive in such a way that others may hear and understand the love of God. For that is truly the gift of Pentecost – that we might all hear, understand and respond to the love of Christ and be transformed – being faithful believers all the days of our lives. And it is this which we are invited to celebrate today.

Pentecost is a celebration, and Celebration is a good thing - But it is not the end of the story – what do we do when like the disciples we recognise the power of God’s spirit in our midst? The liturgical calendar helps us a little with this – today marks the end of Easter – and at the end of today’s service we will extinguish our Easter Candle which we lit at the vigil on Easter – a sign of Christ resurrection and a symbol that the light of Christ dwells with us. Before we extinguish the candle however we will each be invited to take a light from it – a light which we will carry out into the world – a sign that the Holy Spirit has come upon us and goes with us into our daily lives. As part of this action we will be invited to respond to a series of questions which are a commission to live out our Easter and Pentecost faith within our community – that is to continue to be faithful disciples like all those who have gone before us.

These are not new questions – and in fact the church has asked these questions of commission for many generations – they are a re-affirmation of the commitment we make at baptism – of the commitment we make each Easter. They are a reminder that faithfulness to God is an action which requires our whole being and our whole life.

We are faithful as we pray for one another, and for the needs of the world each day. We are faithful as we read the bible and study it, considering what it says to us in this context. We are faithful as we share our faith, are proud of our faith, are visible as followers of Christ.

The final prayer we will use today uses the phrase ‘invite the spirit to drive us out into the wild places of the world’. In this context this doesn’t mean going into the wilderness – it is more about embracing the messiness we spoke of at the start; or the painfulness of our world - taking the light of Christ into places where it is unknown and messy. I suspect that such places are closer to our doors than we might like to think. I suspect that there are people in our very neighbourhood who have never heard about Jesus and are hungry to know more about the faith that is so important to us.

And so today we celebrate the birth of the Church – the day when a few disciples shared their faith with people from different languages and cultural to them – and the church began to grow. We celebrate the joy of our faith – the faithfulness that it calls us to in the midst of all the challenges that face us as a community. And most

importantly we commit to ourselves to continue in our faith- that all might come to know the love and light of Christ – and peace may come – thanks be to God. Amen.