

PENTECOST AT GRACE CHURCH SCARBORO MAY 2012

SERMON NOTES FOR THE EARLY SERVICE

31 years ago, in the North of England, Fr David and his wife, the Revd Lucy Reid, and my wife Janet and I, came together as colleagues in Christian ministry. It was a special time. Despite the passing years – decades (!) – and the width of the Atlantic Ocean, our friendship has endured. And so it gives me great pleasure to be with David this morning at this exciting time of opportunity, possibility and hope, both for him and for you, in the development of Grace Church. I pray every blessing upon you all as you grow together in the service of our Lord Jesus Christ.

By the time Jesus walked in Galilee in his earthly ministry, the Jewish people did not only live in Israel and around the Sea of Galilee or in the City of Jerusalem. They had long been dispersed to many parts of the Roman Empire, following the trade routes to many foreign and different lands. The old classical Hebrew of much of the Scriptures, and the Aramaic popular language spoken in and around Jerusalem and Israel, were now only a memory or a second language for many. In every day life most of these Jews of the Dispersion spoke Greek or Latin or Arabic and many other languages and dialects.

But the old faith was still important to them and it was reinforced by keeping an annual Calendar of festival events in which they would retell their journey of faith and the knowledge of the God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They would recite the stories of the God who had called them to be his people and who had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt.

Two of the great Festivals were Passover and Pentecost, separated by fifty days. (Pentecost means the fifty days) This will sound familiar to us, because much of the Christian Calendar is based on the old Jewish Calendar of Festivals.

If you were a Jew of the Dispersion, one of your great aspirations would be to make the long journey of pilgrimage to Jerusalem for one or more of the pilgrim feasts in the Holy Temple, right at the heart of the Holy City.

That is why, on the great Day of Pentecost, there were so many people crowding the streets of Jerusalem.. And that's why so many different languages were being spoken in family groupings on that day. Because, although they were all Jews, they spoke the languages from where they had come; and many had travelled far.

Now the disciples of Jesus had been waiting for a sign. They had been devastated by the arrest, trial and crucifixion of their great teacher and leader. But their fears, dismay and despair were already being overcome by the Resurrection. They had been amazed and awakened by Jesus' life-transforming Resurrection and uplifted by his glorious Ascension. But they needed a final push to go out and move on.

Now today's Gospel reading tells us that Jesus had promised his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit, who would lead them on and energize them when he could no longer physically be with them. He promised that this gift right from the heart of God would be a gift of advocacy.

Now we know that the word, 'advocate' is often used as a legal term. An advocate is one who can find the right words to put a case. Advocacy is a gift of argument, word and truth. It would enable the disciples to speak the words of Christ to their own and every succeeding generation. When put to the test, they would not be lost for words.

And then, at last, the sign was given and the promise of Jesus fulfilled. They were touched by the burning warmth of the Spirit of God, touched as it were by tongues of fire.

But more than this, the Spirit came to them as a rushing wind, giving them the push they needed, the courage they wanted, to move out of the Upper room, to get out of the house where they felt safe and to get onto the

street, where they could honour the name of Jesus. The gift of the Holy Spirit gave them energy, excitement and enthusiasm, even though it was still quite early in the day.

And so they burst out onto the street and began to speak. Some laughed and called them drunk.

But they were not babbling incoherently, they were not talking a lot of drunken nonsense, their speech was not blurred – they were excited, they were alive. They had been given the gift of language, the gift of communication. The great thing is, that all those people, the returning Jews of the Dispersion, had heard the good news of Jesus in their own languages.

The gift of the Holy Spirit was not a gift of confusion, but of clarity and communication – the language of truth and meaning. Many of the people were touched and challenged by the power of Peter's message and wanted to respond.

The Jewish Pentecost had been a sort of Jewish Harvest Festival, thanking God for God's good gifts in creation; and for the gift of the Law, his enduring word for them. Now they were hearing that God's greatest gift to the world is the life and teaching of Jesus, his unselfish sacrificial love and his living word; truth for all people.

And for those, the many who were touched by Peter's Pentecost message? What were they to do now?

At first Peter's message sounds solemn. They are to know themselves, understand their history with its compromised politics and less than adequate keeping of God's law and its values. They were to understand the sinfulness in their own society and in themselves. They must truly repent.

But on reflection, this is not a negative message. It was to set them free from many burdens; in order to be forgiven, baptized and to live a new Eater life in Christ.

They were to

- join in fellowship with other Christians
- hear the apostles teach
- pray together
- break bread together in common meals
- and share the bread of life in the Eucharist.

The same is true for us, even for cradle Christians like myself. We are to be warmed by the Holy Spirit as a compassionate people touched by the love of God.

- We are to speak and live the Word of God in our society; to governments and the powerful as well as among those among whom we live
- have a bias to the poor
- know ourselves
- be a forgiven and forgiving people
- be a people who know the Word of God, who hear the apostles teaching and are ready to share it with each other and the word around us
- be a people who break bread together in true communion and fellowship
- be a joyful people, ready to share our joy with others
- be a driven people, moving out of our safety zones to travel into the future in faith as modern day disciples

We need not all be orators. We might never speak a word. But the way we live will speak for us and for Christ.

We are to be people of grace in a sometimes ungracious world.

GRACE CHURCH: SERMON NOTS FOR THE LATER SERVICE PENTECOST 2012

It is a great privilege to be invited to be with you in Grace Church today; alongside my beloved friend and brother in Christ, FR David. When he and his wife Revd Lucy Reid were my colleagues 31 years ago in the North of England, I gained so much from their companionship and learned so much with them, as we explored what it meant to be disciples of Jesus Christ and Christian ministers together. From what I have seen over the last few weeks, David is in the right place, with the right people, at the right time.

Last Sunday in Ascension-tide, David urged us to take flight with Jesus. To be lifted up with him, to leave behind all that might hold us back, or imprison us, or weigh us down; so that like the first disciples we might take the risk of being witnesses for Jesus to all the ends of the earth.

Because through his glorious Resurrection and Ascension, broke free from one time, one place, one people, one language, one culture, to be Lord of all time, all places, all peoples, every language and every culture.

But how was he going to do it generation after generation? Well, he intended to do it through the lives of those he had invited to be lifted up by him. He'd do it through his Easter people, those who would die daily to the old and the earthbound and who would rise daily to new life in him – starting with his first disciples.

But to do this, to take this gigantic risk, the disciples needed help. Many of them were poor fishermen. They came from the unfashionable North, around the Sea of Galilee, people sometimes looked down upon in the more sophisticated South. It had been a great and fearful adventure for them to travel down to the astonishingly magnificent capital city of Jerusalem in the South.

So they were now again excited after having been traumatized by the experience of seeing their young teacher and leader arrested, put on trial, and crucified. They were just beginning to shed their fears and doubts and were beginning to want to fly. But they were not quite ready to flap their wings and sing their new song.

Jesus knew this and, as their risen and ascended Lord, he asked them to wait – wait for the gift he had already promised them.

We heard about this gift in today's Gospel reading: the gift of the Holy Spirit, who would be their advocate, who would give them words of truth, who would help them speak the words and truth of Jesus and who would give them the strength and courage to do this.

And so we now move from Easter and the ascension to Pentecost: it means the fifty days in the Jewish Calendar from Passover. It was originally a harvest festival, giving God praise and thanks for the fruits of the earth and the gift of the Law, God's word for them.

Now as we know, the Jewish people had become dispersed all over the Roman Empire and they had learned to speak the languages of the places where they had settled. Some would speak Greek, others Roman, some Arabic and so on. If you were a Jew of the Dispersion, it was a great aspiration at least once or twice in your life, if you could do it, to go on pilgrimage to one of the great Festivals in the Holy temple of the Holy City of Jerusalem. That's why there were so many people, who had travelled significant distances, on the streets of Jerusalem for Pentecost.

Therefore, now was the time when the disciples of Jesus must take flight. The waiting must come to an end. They couldn't stay in the relative security of the house in Jerusalem any longer. It was now or never. The moment was there to be seized. Could they do it. They were like fledglings about to flap their wings and fly from the nest for the first time. It was a great risk.

And then the promise was fulfilled. They were touched with the fire and warmth and life of the Spirit of God. They were driven out into the streets of the City by the rushing mighty wind of God. The dynamic of God's Holy Spirit was moving on them, in them and through them. They were not going out in their own strength.

They became witnesses and they spoke. Some of the crowd ridiculed and laughed at them:
'You are just a bunch of ignorant daft drunken Galileans.'

But others said 'No, they are not drunk. We are hearing them speak to us in our own languages, and what powerful words they are speaking. Words of Jesus of Nazareth, words of judgement, words of invitation, words and ideas that dreams are made of; exciting words, dynamic words, life-changing words.'

So they asked:

'What can we do to embrace this life? To hear more of these words? To enter into this vision? Perhaps to see these dreams for ourselves?'

So Peter said:

'Know yourselves. Be truthful about your lives. Leave behind all that weighs you down. Come follow us. Come be baptized. Come, be in fellowship with us. Commune with us. Come and be blessed with new life; and break bread, the bread of life with us.'

And so, step by step, generation by generation, this word, this call, this new life in Christ, this vision of truth and meaning, has taken flight and been seen and heard on every continent and in every subsequent generation and expressed in many different cultures and languages. It has been spread by God's ordinary people, like you and me – made extraordinary by the gift of the Spirit.

For us too, there will be times to wait, to think, to learn, to build each other up, to be strong in our communion, to be faithful in our common life of prayer, study and mutual service. There will be a time to build up understanding and trust, the sharing of brotherly and sisterly love in the gathering of God's people. This language of the nurturing and caring we can bring to each other is wonderful and beautiful.

But then there are other times. Times that cannot be missed, times when we must not hesitate; times when like the fledgling birds we must take flight, fly free and rise up, to go out in Christ's name; times to speak a word from the Lord for our generation. Times to be bold.

And when we have identified such a time, then we do not turn first to our own strength and talents, but call upon the power of the Holy Spirit of God: to be filled with God's fire, energy and enthusiasm and to seize the moment in Jesus' name.

Earlier, I described the Jewish Pentecost as a sort of harvest festival, giving thanks for God's good gifts and the fruits of the earth. Well, God's gift of the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, always bring forth a spiritual harvest which reflect the unselfish love and the compassionate and passionate Word of our Saviour.

St Paul tells us in his letter to the Christians in Galatia what those fruits are: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.'

We too are called to bear such fruits as we become more Christ-like. This is just as true whether you are old or young, fit and healthy or weak and infirm. All can bear such fruits, making our Church more Christ-like and being a living witness to the world in which we live, a world which will always need such fruits. Indeed I have experienced those fruits of the Spirit, peace, patience and self-control, emanating most powerfully from those who are suffering most and challenged most.

You don't have to be great at foreign languages to love God and love your neighbour; you don't have to be an articulate and powerful preacher to live the Word of God and be God's witness. But you do need to have the courage to open your heart to God's Word and God's Spirit, and then through you and me our Lord Jesus Christ will be known in the daily details of our lives and in the challenging moments when they come.