

St Mary's, Wheatley (LEP service)
Sunday 19 May 2013 – Pentecost
Acts 2.1-21; John 14.8-17

When I was a young clergyman I wore my clerical collar rather more than I do now. It was usually helpful, but not always. There was the time I was flying back into Los Angeles from Mexico City and found myself sitting next to an elderly Mexican lady who insisted on telling me all about her religious experiences. I listened politely and tried not to read my paper too obviously, but there was no escape, and she carried on for the whole flight. I was therefore very glad to be in civvies when I heard a conversation between two people in a railway carriage on the train from Brighton to London. One of them thought he was a failure because he was not able to speak in tongues. The other, a pastor of some sort, was encouraging him to keep praying for this gift, as it was the sign of a real Christian. I longed to intervene and remind them what St Paul had written about the primacy of love over the more dramatic spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 13, 'If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal'. But I kept my counsel because I sensed it would have been in vain.

I may be worried about the need to demonstrate your faith by engaging in glossolalia, which is the posh term for speaking in tongues, because I've spent most of my working life teaching a foreign language to university students,. If people could suddenly acquire the gift of tongues without the painful process of mastering the grammar first I and others like me would be quickly out of a job. There are stories about people who suddenly burst into a language they do not know, but in most cases the gift is associated with a series of unintelligible sounds which do not correspond to any known language and which require interpretation if they are to be of any use to anyone. Luke is clear that on the first day of Pentecost people heard the witness of the apostles in their own language, because he tells us where they came from, and, by implication, what they spoke. Nowadays we could use the technology and expertise of simultaneous translation, in which everyone hears the message in their own language through headphones. But Luke is also clear that this linguistic miracle is caused by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Unless we are literalists, we need not be

troubled by the fact that in John the Spirit is breathed on the disciples when the risen Christ first appears to them. The truth is, as John himself saw, that the Spirit blows where she wills, and that we cannot predict or command her movement.

Human language is an extraordinary phenomenon. Three years ago the University of Oxford laid on a bus for some of us to go to the Boat Race, and Richard Dawkins, the outspoken atheist, whom I've known for some while, came and sat by me. We spent much of the journey in a serious and fascinating conversation about how language evolved and to what purpose. No one really knows; but the organs which make speech possible must have evolved because of the advantages it conferred. Most of us know how frustrating it is when you try to communicate with someone who doesn't speak your language, but we don't always realise how easy it is to be misunderstood when we share the same one. In the ancient myth of the Tower of Babel, linguistic barriers become a symbol for the divisions which exist among different parts of the human family, as it wrestles with the reality of mutual incomprehension and projects back into an idealised past a moment when we all understood one another and could therefore reach for the stars together. Luke's account tells us of a moment when language barriers were unexpectedly overcome and a new common purpose became possible across them: not founded on a tower stretching into the heavens, but on God's stretching down to dwell among us in Christ, become the victim of our worst impulses, and burst free from their iron grip.

The common language of much of the Roman Empire was not Latin, but Greek. If Peter was speaking in Greek his hearers would have at least a working knowledge of it. If he was speaking Aramaic, well, they were all Jews, because they had come to Jerusalem from all over the Middle East to celebrate the feast of Shavu'ot or Pentecost, the festival at which the first fruits of the harvest were offered and which commemorated the giving of the Law to Moses at Sinai. So this was not a random crowd; wherever they had come from and whatever language they spoke, they all belonged to the same community, they shared the same holy book and its holy language, and practised the traditions and customs of their faith. Things happen when people gather together like this. We had a small example of it last year at the URC, when some of us watched together, in church, the BBC's retelling of the Nativity story

from a year or two back. Many of us had seen it at home by the fireside and found it interesting; but the experience of watching it together was quite different. The power of the story, despite its being so utterly familiar, hit home in a way it hadn't and perhaps never could as we watched at home. Some of us had tears in our eyes, and that kind of emotional involvement is not something our tradition tends to encourage.

One of the things the Church can offer to our fragmented society is a place where people come together to reflect on the most important questions of life, about the meaning of our own individual existence and about the kind of world we would like to build. The pressures of modern life tend to crowd them out. There's something about connecting these questions to the language of Scripture in a communal setting which opens out possibilities of change and transformation in a way sitting by the television or complaining about the state of things to our mates in the pub doesn't. It's no accident, then, that people had gathered together for a common purpose when the Holy Spirit came to jerk them out of their comfort zones. That same Spirit, week in, week out, at worship can challenge us as a body, rebuke us, encourage us, energise us to leave behind unhelpful or damaging attitudes and habits and release in us gifts and abilities we never knew we had. Whatever is holding us back can be swept away. No one has to settle for the status quo.

Everyone heard the Gospel in a language they could understand. Do we take that part of the work of the Spirit seriously? There's a huge job of translation to be done for people in our own communities. They think they understand the language we speak. They think it is about making people feel guilty and negative, when the whole thrust of the Gospel is about forgiveness and growth. They think it is about judging and condemning, when it is about the grace which can rebuild broken lives. They think it excludes all kinds of people whose lives do not conform to traditional moral standards, whatever those may be, when Jesus went out of his way to include those very people in his ministry of healing and hope. They think it is about believing impossible or ridiculous things, in the face of what science tells us to be true, when we are called to love God with our minds as well as our hearts and that means facing the intellectual challenges of the day, not burying our heads in the sand. They think that the Bible is a million miles away from where they are, though its great themes are

exactly those which preoccupy us the most – how to live meaningfully, how to create societies and institutions which are built on justice for all rather than lining one's own pockets. If we take Acts seriously, the Spirit who comes in animating breath and fire, symbols of the divine presence throughout the Old Testament – think Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones, think Moses at the burning bush – is the translator par excellence. But how shall we be good translators unless we understand the language our contemporaries speak, by which I do not mean the words they use so much as the concerns they express? I have found so much misunderstanding of the Christian faith in my working life in universities, and it is only compounded by those Christian groups who shout the loudest and hog the headlines, drowning out the quiet work of the translator.

But if we are to be translators of the Gospel to our contemporaries, words alone will never suffice, however clever or beautiful they are. Everyone understands the unspoken language of kindness, generosity, mercy and acceptance – what Paul elsewhere calls the fruits of the Spirit - save those whose hearts are hardened against them. In Acts, Peter's sermon has such an effect on the listeners that they ask what they should do. What we do together as Christian people also needs to be open to the power of the Holy Spirit. If we do not break down barriers which exclude people; if we fail to speak and act for those who are powerless; if we do not stand up for the establishment of justice and peace where they are denied, are we not children of the world, rather than of the wind and fire of the life of God? We are called to listen for the Spirit as she interprets what the world is saying to us, and to translate the words and deeds of the risen and ascended Christ into signs of hope and blessing for our troubled times. When we gather together in one place, as we do today with the historical barriers between our traditions happily absent, it should be in expectation; not of a sudden outbreak of tongues, because that was not the point of Pentecost, but in anticipation that the Spirit will quietly yet insistently lead us into places where we have not been and to people whom we do not yet know, so that more barriers will be broken down and the work of raising up all that has been cast down will continue. If we think the Spirit only comes as mighty rushing wind and tongues of flame we shall sit around waiting for a very long time, and sitting around is not what Pentecost asks

of us - not least because we shall miss the call of Spirit who is the breath of abundant life to those who are exhausted and the fire of transforming love to those whose hearts have grown cold.