

THE PENTECOST – ST NICOLAS'S, ABINGDON

19 May 2024



Acts 2: 1–21 / Romans 8.22–27 / John 15.26–27; 16.4b–15

The Spirit helps us in our weakness....



In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

WHEN ST PETER TALKS ABOUT THE SPIRIT, he makes the last days sound more than a little dramatic: ‘God declares, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh... I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood”’. And he quotes that prophecy to *explain* the whirlwind sound that filled the apostolic dormitory, and the Twelve lit up with spiritual flames, proclaiming the Gospel in languages nor you nor they had even known *existed*. Short of the actual, on the spot, Four Horsemen Judgement Day itself, this must have been about the most dramatic thing that could possibly happen; compared to Pentecost, the most compelling cinematic plot twist looks more like the endearingly clumsy special effects in BBC programmes from the sixties.

At the heart of this amazing story, though, lies a very simple, prosaic phenomenon. The apostles spoke in different languages. Wow. That’s something I can do, and probably many of you can do *better* than I. People speak in different languages all the time, and though some of us struggle with languages, others move fluently from English to Polish or Igbo or Punjabi or Arabic or any of dozens of other languages. And we do it without fiery auras or cyclonic sound effects. Indeed, the *bystanders* in the Pentecost Lesson express greater astonishment at the

miracle of *xenoglossy*, the apostles' capacity spontaneously to speak in unknown languages, than in the winds or sounds or flames: 'Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?'

That divergence between the breath-taking stage-dressing on one hand and the miraculous overdubbing on the other, corresponds to common ways of talking about miracles. Some people insist on an literal, visible, dramatic, unnatural manifestation of divine power; and others suggest that God's power comes to expression more truly in everyday ways, speaking to the butcher in Hungarian and to the librarian in Latin and to the vicar in English. We have to grant that *dramatic* miracles *strike* on-lookers with profound force; in the gospels, Jesus's neighbours follow him around *asking* for miracles: healings, exorcisms, feeding multitudes from just a few loaves. But by the same token, these *dramatic* miracles provide fuel for the *antagonists* of Christian faith, who appeal to the *plain fact* that these sorts of events don't happen often enough, under laboratory conditions, subject to double-blind randomised controlled trials, to provide sufficient evidence for the existence of God. With *enough* dramatic marvels, many people come to believe; *without* enough drama, many people *won't* believe.

Friends, as you may have inferred over the past few weeks, I don't have an especially dramatic temperament. I prefer working at the unspectacular level of just *getting things done*, letting other people engage the spotlit world of hair-raising miracles and exuberant success and tragic loss. I do not walk through life accompanied by the high-intensity soundtrack of a *Mission Impossible* theme; if you hear background music when I stroll through the Market Square, you're

probably hearing a small jazz ensemble working thoughtfully through a Theophilus Monk or Charles Mingus composition. Immersed in a world coloured in neon high-viz by competitive sport, *Survivor*, political rhetoric, various other hype-driven manias, you will find me more at home pursuing such undramatic activities as *reading*. Where some climb sheer mountain faces, I'm at home restoring fountain pens. While other clergy feature on the telly, I'm sitting in a dimly-lit cafe or pub, working with churchwardens or listening to troubled souls.

The Holy Spirit doesn't care, though, about how loudly anybody publicises our ministries. The Spirit doesn't trade in limelight for miracles, nor in self-congratulation for low-profile faithfulness. Where there's need for a miracle, the Spirit sets apostles' hair on fire and gives them an instant spiritual Berlitz (or now, Duolingo) diploma. Where the work of God can be accomplished without fanfare, the Spirit supplies the persistence and energy and understanding to work out these purposes in relative obscurity. It's not the publicity that makes a miracle, nor is it the humble obscurity that authenticates God's power. To be honest, however dramatic or prosaic divine action seems to you or me, I suspect that God doesn't even *notice* the difference.

To take just one example: the church movement that takes its name from today's commemoration, the Pentecostal Holiness churches, are probably *best known* for their emphasis on the proof of the Spirit's grace by speaking in unintelligible tongues. Just as this morning's apostles began speaking in languages that they hadn't understood, so Pentecostal worshippers experience their captivity to the Holy Spirit by uttering divine messages in angelic languages. That's the spotlight, high-viz feature of Pentecostal faith — but in the background, often forgotten today, lies the practice inaugurated at the Asuza Street Revival in Los Angeles, of refusing any racial distinction among their

members. While city churches of various sorts may have reinforced their commitment to racial segregation, or at best overlooked the *social* segregation that produced *separate* Black and white congregations, Pentecostals in a ramshackle Los Angeles warehouse were getting into trouble for permitting races to mix while praising God. Now, does the miracle lie in the tongue-speaking, or in the grace by which people recognised one another as sisters and brothers, children of one Father? Does the miracle require some wondrous effect that we can't reproduce out of human will and determination, or might ordinary people accomplish miraculous effects just by simple acts of patience and forbearance and goodwill?

Maybe. Or *maybe* miracles manifest God's majesty more or less visibly without our arguing about how dramatically a miracle has to defy natural laws in order to *count* as a miracle, or whether a humble, simple action may count as a miracle if it has disproportionately intense effects. Maybe *arguing* about miracles is itself a clue that we've missed the point altogether.

So when, in a few minutes, we end our Pentecost observance by commissioning the congregation — that's you — to go forth encouraged, supported, and emboldened by the Holy Spirit to make known Christ's glorious saving love in all the world, Amen! But Common Worship proposes this commission by urging you to *dare* to do this, that, and the other — emphasising a note of *drama* that risks undermining the plain holy discipleship that lies readily within our grasp. The 'Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze' might have *broken his neck* if his hand slipped. When teenagers play 'Truth or Dare', the *dare* alternative involves significant social *risk*. 'Daring' takes everyday discipleship and artificially *dramatises* it, as if loving God and one another isn't good enough unless it has a pulsing electronic

soundtrack and a half dozen stunt men. The Asuza Street Pentecostals didn't *dare* to worship side by side; they just *got to* it. Peter and John didn't *dare* to heal the disabled man on the steps of the Temple. Paul didn't *dare* to preach the gospel, in season and out of season. That's just *them*. That's what they *did*.

So we'll take up our commission, we'll make some bold promises; but between you and me, let's keep our mind less on the *dramatic* works of the Spirit, and see if we can let the Spirit do its work on us during our *undramatic* moments. Let's be a tiny bit more Pentecostal. Let's do our good works in secret, and trust that our Father who sees in secret will know. That's *just us*. We've been imbued with the Holy Spirit; what we need to do is let the Spirit work on us, and in us, and through us. If we are led by the Spirit, then the drama, the miracles, and the *daring* will take care of themselves.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit —

Amen