***The Miracle of Understanding***

**Sermon Pentecost A.**

Acts 2:1-21, John 20: 19-23.

When I was a probationer – that bit between leaving theological college and being ordained, I had to have a couple of services assessed, one of those was a Pentecost service. My sermon was reviewed by two people at Trinity College. One of whom waxed lyrical about it, one of whom agreed it was very proficient, but then asked who was I not to preach the sermon he expected to read on Pentecost Sunday. Which was some reflection on those tongues of fire and quite what they were.

Well you know me, by now. I was completely unrepentant and frankly I have never preached the standard Pentecost sermon; if there really is such a thing. But I don’t have my own standard Pentecost sermon either, this is simply this year’s offering.

Have you ever found yourself saying something you know your mother or father would have said? The words, the inflection, the way? When I first caught myself doing this I shuddered – no! This cannot be. Perhaps, in a mixture of horror and bemusement, your children have said they have begun to channel you?

My horror didn’t last that long, in fact I started seeing my father looking bleary eyed back at me in the mirror during my morning shave. As we get older we - for better or worse – come to resemble our parents more and more. Perhaps as we tick off yet another birthday we take some stock of this. And today is all our birthdays. It is a truism that Pentecost is the church’s birthday. Sometimes, especially in congregations with lots of children, the birthday theme is played up. I have seen party balloons in churches on this day – sometimes cake has been served afterwards. Sorry – we might have candles but present circumstances preclude the serving of cake.

The truth is that – as we get a little older – we downplay birthdays somewhat. Once they seemed like important milestones, steps on the way to being grown up, that seem to take forever (well a year anyway, and that might have been forever way back then.) Yet before we know it life changes gear and they seem to come around with an ominous rapidity.

We might have cake – or even the odd balloon – but we find that our birthdays can bring a degree of introspection, a chance for a life audit. Off the top of my head, assuming Jesus was born really in 3 BC - as most scholars think - and lived to be 33, then on this birthday we are about 1990 years old, give or take a year. Old enough you might think for a little introspection.

A good question we might ask ourselves on this our birthday is just how much are we growing to like our parent. God, Father, Mother? In particular how are we growing in the image of one whose life uniquely expressed what God is like and embodied it in his humanity? How much are we coming to resemble Jesus?

When we look in the mirror do we see something of his compassion, his justice, his faithfulness? Is that likeness becoming more marked in us and in the Church over time, or is it fading away? And it isn’t staying the same, it is either growing or shrinking. If we are to ask ourselves this question then let us consider the miracle at the heart of the Pentecost story, and no I haven’t changed my mind about the those tongues of fire. The miracle isn’t so much the outpouring of the Spirit as the constant witness of Scripture is to the generosity of God beginning in creation. The miracle lies in what this outpouring achieves, how it is enacted amongst those who received it.

Let’s take a look at that day, the feast of Pentecost, so called because it occurs fifty days after the celebration of Passover. Pentecost is a Greek word, in Hebrew it is *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks. The celebration on which Jews recall the giving of the Torah and celebrates the first grain harvest in the land of Israel after it was settled. It is the completion of Passover, the people are freed at Passover but now they have the Law, now they have the first fruits of the land they settled. So also for us Pentecost stands for completion, right from the beginning Christians understood the death and resurrection of Jesus as Passover, as liberation and freedom. Passover marks a new order; that birthday so often talked about.

So let’s look at the account, here in Jerusalem the city was heaving, just like it had been fifty days earlier for Passover. Jews from around the Mediterranean had come to Jerusalem for one of the pilgrim festivals; they spoke a range of languages, most of them of course had been born Jewish but many were converts. They were there together of course, one in purpose, but perhaps clinging to their groups, to people who spoke their language, to people who weren’t too “foreign.”

Yet in the drama of this Pentecost Day the spirit spreads like tongues of flame, like wild fire, among those gathered there and “*all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability*.”

The true miracle of Pentecost is the overcoming of separation, the end of estrangement, the creating of the possibility of mutuality and hospitality between people. It is this miracle which forms and gives energy to a new community. It gives energy and life to us still.

I want to tell a little story – a true one in fact – to show something of the presence of spirit building connection across difference, in this case despite the institutional church.

Amid the chaos and destruction in Europe at the end of World War One the American Friends Service Committee (the US Quaker charity for the relief of poverty overseas) sent volunteers to Europe. They included a nurse who went to a village in Poland, there she attended births, nursed the dying and attended at many an illness in between.

Eventually she succumbed to illness herself and died. The villagers loved her, this foreigner with her strange ways and her different faith had become one of them. So naturally they wanted to bury her in their cemetery. Yet here’s the thing, when the parish priest told his bishop what the villagers wanted he was told – in no uncertain terms – that this was impossible. The graveyard was consecrated ground, this woman had been a Protestant and – as a lifelong Quaker – had never even been baptised. She would have to be buried in unconsecrated land.

So she was buried without ceremony in a field beyond the cemetery. But the night after the burial something wonderful happened. The villagers moved the cemetery fence and extended the cemetery boundary far enough into the field that the nurse’s grave was now part of their cemetery.

This to me is a Pentecost miracle, the overcoming of difference through trust and love. Seeing our connection to the “other” as being more significant than our difference.

Would that we had more of them. There is still wariness, still fearfulness, isolation and estrangement amongst Christians. Even when we speak the same language it still seems that what we have to say can be incomprehensible to people not like “us,” whoever “us” is. We are a liberal or progressive “us,” we could be an evangelical “us”, or a charismatic or catholic one. Which is not to say that each us’ should not own our position but are we speaking to one another? Are our points of difference places of respectful encounter and the search for connection or are they marked by walls and fences that need to be dismantled and moved?

We have a duty to attend to this, to our unity in love, in order that we might fulfil the second part of the Pentecost story. We can often remember the story as one big birthday party and there is the danger of sentimentality to this. We can revel in how very special we are but the energy given at Pentecost wasn’t just for a big party, it was to take us out of ourselves into the world; that we might share something of the life and hope we have found and act on it in such a way as to bring life and hope to others.

The Spirit is known most of all in those gifts which nurture people, which build up hope and community, which bring renewal. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit which gives us the energy to work for the re-creation of the world, for the end of estrangement between peoples, for peace such as the world cannot give. These things are the Pentecost harvest, the first fruits of the Kingdom of God.

When we can see a little of this in ourselves, in one another as church and in the wider world we have begun to see something of the face of God, something of the one who was in Christ.

That transformation is certainly unfinished, yet ultimately like fire it is unstoppable.