

Pentecost reminds us that ...

... the church doesn't begin when everyone agrees

... but when everyone hears and is heard!

A sermon given on Pentecost, 8th June 2025 – by the Curate, the Revd Charlie Shefford, in Beverley Minster.

Acts 2:1-21

A few weeks ago, I received an email (not from a regular member of the congregation, I should add) in response to a sermon that I preached. Over the course of several paragraphs I was accused of, amongst other things, of being both a Hamas propagandist and a terrorist sympathiser. Immediately after reading this email I felt like a scorned little boy who'd done something incredibly wrong. Then I became busy with other things and moved on, for a while at least. After a few hours had passed I instead felt a self-righteous indignation: I thought, How dare they? I should really tell them and give them a piece of my mind and I started thinking of all the things I could say to prove them wrong and to justify myself and to tell them just how wrong they were. And then again I became busy and forgot and moved on. And then a few more hours passed again and with a bit of distance, I began to realise that the email had never really been about me - I think I had just become a sort of dehumanised opposing point of view. And so not wanting to fall into this same trap of treating this person as a viewpoint rather than a person, and not wanting to reply in a spirit of feeling hard done by or trying to justify myself, I started to think of the person themselves: someone upset; clearly passionate, even if they weren't expressing it in the most constructive way. It highlighted to me how so much of our discourse today is centred around being made to feel guilt or shame or to respond with self-righteous indignation.

This whole interaction caused me to reflect on how we do diversity of conviction and opinion and how we deal with disagreement, both in the church and in the world - both of which seem to be increasingly fractured, quicker to divide, to distrust, and demonise than ever. It's tempting to say, "Well, it's just because we're so different now; people believe wildly different things; we don't share as many basic assumptions as we used to." But that feels incomplete somehow as an answer, because difference and disagreement aren't new things - and are by no means bad things either. So we're left asking, 'Is diversity of opinion and conviction a threat?' Should we aim to all think and feel the same? After all, in our reading last week, Jesus prayed that all his followers would be one.

But then, as we saw in our reading from Acts this morning, how closed in on themselves the disciples were when all they had was each other, and how the church is most wonderful and most itself when it is in dialogue across all people, when it embraces diversity and reaches out. So whatever unity means, it cannot mean uniformity. And despite the church's very shameful past, it does largely seem to be moving in the right direction (however slowly) when it comes to embracing a diversity of identity. What it seems to be struggling with right now is a diversity of conviction and opinion.

Today on Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, we need to ask 'What is the Church intended to be?' In our world today and even (or especially) in our church, we seem to find it harder to remain in fellowship with someone who believes differently - whether about worship, theology, ethics, or politics. Disagreement activates deep emotional responses - as I said earlier, we often respond like a guilty child or an indignant parent full of moral superiority. And trying to hold together unity in this is hard, but as Pentecost reminds us, we aren't doing this alone.

So what is the role of the Spirit in all of this?

First, as we saw in our reading this morning, the Spirit enables people to understand each other. But interestingly, they don't all start speaking the same language - rather, the church speaks in a way that all can understand. The miracle isn't sameness, it's communication across difference - the Spirit doesn't erase difference, but enables understanding within it: to listen with empathy; to speak with humility; and remain united even when we don't fully agree.

Second, the Spirit transforms us. Rather than responding to disagreement or criticism, with fear, shame, or anger, we respond with the fruit of the Spirit - as Saint Paul tells us in Galatians, the fruit of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Lastly, the Spirit moves us from roles to relationships - when we see each other as brothers and sisters in Christ rather than as a threat or a subordinate, real dialogue becomes possible.

So as we reflect on the Feast of Pentecost, 'What does it mean to be the church?' It means that we are called not to erase our differences, but to embody a deeper kind of unity, one that only the Spirit can create - a unity not of uniformity, but of understanding. In a world that urges us to divide and to shame, the church is called to be an example of what it means to listen and to build bridges. Perhaps most importantly, Pentecost reminds us that the church doesn't begin when everyone agrees, but when everyone hears and everyone is heard.

So...

*May we speak in ways others can understand;
May we listen with hearts wide open;
May the church continue to walk in the Spirit,
not in the safety of sameness,
but in love that reaches
across all boundaries and all divisions.*

Reading Text

Acts 2:1-21

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' ¹³ But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.' ¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."