

## THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

Pentecost

St. Michael Cornhill

Sung Eucharist with Baptism

Sunday May 15<sup>th</sup> 2016

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Go into a local pub in Norwich, or better still in deep Norfolk and it's as likely as not you'll hear a conversation that goes like this: 'Well, *moi woman*, we can't be staying *hare all nate*.' 'Ok, then', says his wife, 'Let's be *goeing hmm*.' Indeed in some parts of the county you need to have been living there for a while before you've much of an idea what they're saying.

Of course, it's not just Norfolk. When I was staying at Alnmouth Friary in Northumberland, some fifty years ago, young Tommy Angus – a bit of a lad, as they'd say up there, asked me simply: 'Why, *yer gan* the *boot* the *neat*?' Translators helped – he meant 'Are you going out in the boat tonight?' Glasgow is certainly a place where you need an interpreter. Canada, however, from whence we have visitors today, is easy by comparison. But I do know that where Americans would say 'abowt', Canadians would say 'aboat.'

Today's first two readings major on language, speech and understanding. That first reading about Babel is something of a parable, amongst other things. The story indicates how Israel's God will respond to vaunted pride or hubris within humanity. The building of the tower of Babel is but the beginning. Where will their pride take them next? God acts in a manner which is without violence, but with a good sprinkling of irony and of the comic! Let's confuse their language, we read. Their speech is reduced to *babble*, as we'd say, taking our cue from Babel. So, the multiplicity of languages in our world is a sign of our fallenness as human beings.

Luke, in his second volume – he's the only evangelist to follow up his gospels with a history of the fledgling Christian community – Luke describes the day of Pentecost which we honour and celebrate today. One of the key signs he describes runs thus:

'All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability. . . How is it we hear, each of us, in our own language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome...Cretans and Arabs.'

Luke, as can be seen from all his writings is both sophisticated and cosmopolitan. Here he describes, in that brief sentence, what would have been to people of his time 'the whole of the known world.' So the impact of the coming of the Spirit, as promised by Jesus – not only in Luke's Gospel but in the others too - the impact is world transforming. The point which Luke is driving home is one of unity. God in Christ calls all humanity into union with himself. This paradigm of one language is the most powerful image at his disposal to show just how remarkable was the impact of Jesus – his life, passion, death and resurrection and now his impact within all humanity.

This is a message of some considerable impact for our age. It speaks to our condition. So, for example, we are living in one of those periods of mass migration. Such periods are profoundly disturbing and de-stabilising. Ultimately it was the climax of such a vast movement of peoples that spelt the end of the Roman Empire. The result of yet another wave – Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Danes - and just slightly later Normans (themselves displaced Norse-men) - which would be the basis of what became England.

But alongside this almost exponential movement of peoples, this has also been a generation of revived nationalisms. The disintegration of Yugoslavia (admittedly an artificial union), the uncertainties in Catalonia and the Basque country, the referendum in Scotland – and, of course, *Brexit*. There is a particularly resonant pattern across our world – even the Russian federation fears fissiparation and even disintegration.

Whilst a desire for belonging, and even a secrecy or obsession with our own locality, is something we all might understand, nonetheless taken to extremes it certainly does not point to understanding, to togetherness or to mutual generosity within the human community.

Against all this, stands the message of Pentecost. It is a message of unity and then generosity. God calls us to be *one*. In some ways Pentecost says nothing new. After all, what Christians have described as the Holy Spirit is there latent already in the Jewish tradition, in the *Wisdom* of God. God is always out there before us

And, of course, we might say the same thing as we celebrate the baptism of tiny Tess this morning. God is with her from birth. We believe that she is born into a world permeated by God's spirit and wisdom. Tess' family includes the practising of both Judaism and Christianity. Both traditions believe that Tess is upheld in God's loving arms from birth.

So why baptise?

The answer is not so difficult to see. In baptising Tess, we are all acknowledging and celebrating God's love as underpinning all creation. The Spirit of truth will lead us into all truth, Jesus says. So Tess' baptism into that Spirit of unity is a challenge to us all. At a time of almost unprecedented fragmentation, how shall we, both indirectly and as a tiny community, how shall we encourage the human unity called out of all of us by Almighty God, and in Jesus Christ our Lord?

Amen

#### Readings

Genesis. 11. 1-9.

Acts. 2. 1-21.

John. 14. 8-17.