

SERMON: 09 June 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“Speaking in a language for all” (Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2:1-21)

On the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after Passover, the Apostle Peter explains to the crowd that what they were witnessing was what the prophet Joel had prophesied, that in the last days, the Lord God would pour out his Spirit on all people, men and women alike.

Though all people are different, all people will share the one Spirit, is the message of Pentecost. Even with all the diversity within humanity and creation, there will come about a unity because of the Spirit's work.

We can see that when we read to the end of the second chapter of Acts. The last 6 verses show us how the early believers formed a united community under the direction of the Holy Spirit - they shared all things in common. They shared their belongings, their property and everything they had. They shared their meals together. No one was in need. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship together and to prayer together. We might say, they shared together and spoke together in a language of love, a language which made room for all and could be understood by all.

The language of Christ is love. The language of Pentecost is love. The language of Pentecost is love. The language of the church must therefore be love. Love is the universal language for all.

Richard Rohr says this about love.

[SLIDE] “Love, the attraction of all things toward all things, is a universal language. We all know love when we see it.”

I remember being very moved years ago when reading something that Rick and Kay Warren wrote about their son Matthew. Tragically, Matthew took his own life at a young age. At Matthew's funeral, his parents said this about him:

[SLIDE] “You who watched Matthew grow up knew he was an incredibly kind, gentle and compassionate man. He had a brilliant intellect and a gift for sensing who was most in pain or most uncomfortable in a room. He'd then make a bee line to that person to engage and encourage them”.

That is the language of love in action. The attraction of one part of creation towards another. That is the work of the Divine Spirit in creation, moving beyond itself, making connections, bringing unity in diversity, like all the different colours in the one rainbow.

Jesus of Nazareth was the most complete Spirit filled, anointed, presence of God, in human form. God was present in Jesus as the Christ, the Spirit's presence and the foretaste of what all of creation would become.

Jesus communicated with the language of love and he existed as the flesh and blood presence of God so that his disciples could learn to love him and be loved by him, in a real human way, and discover this mutual attraction of all things towards all things.

In the same way, we learn to love God by loving Jesus but we don't stop there. Through loving Jesus we discover Christ as the anointing presence of God everywhere. We mature into seeing Christ as the anointing presence of God in all of creation, in every person and every creature and in all living things and love is the force, the energy behind it all, working in a way to bring unity with diversity.

We find this difficult because it seems to be human nature to erect barriers or to keep distances. The Holy Spirit, as God's presence within people, is given freely by God so that barriers can be broken down and fresh connections of love can be made between things.

In order to deal with barriers people of faith need to be prepared to heed the Spirit's call to cross cultures, and move into unfamiliar circles. This isn't hard work. Rather its the natural attracting energy force of the Divine Spirit, just as was at work in Matthew Warren, sensing those in pain or discomfort and being drawn to them.

[SLIDE] Theologian, Christena Cleveland - "People can *meet* God within their cultural context but in order to *follow* God, they must cross into other cultures because that's what Jesus did in the incarnation and on the cross".

She argues, and I agree, that the church needs to grow beyond itself by being cross cultural. (As an aside, we might think of it as putting the cross in the centre of all culture).

The church grows when it rubs shoulders with people who are not like us. If Christians only surround themselves with other Christians who believe the same as they do then not much growth happens.

If we look at Jesus' life, we see him willing to cross borders and meet others - other genders, other abilities, other generations, other races, those of another religious flavour.

In Genesis 11, we find in the story of the Tower of Babel, Noah's descendants wanting to confine themselves to the one city, in order to make themselves famous and to save them from being scattered all over the world. But the Lord decides to introduce different languages in order to do that very thing, scatter them all over the world. So, it seems that God loves the spreading and the diversity yet also works to bring a unity in the Spirit at Pentecost, which is sometimes described as a reversal of Babel but maybe it's better seen as a compliment to it.

"Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.'"

(9:1) - fruitfulness is intended over all the earth.

"Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth."

(9:16) - many colours in one rainbow = diversity in unity.

At Pentecost, unity came because peoples from all over the world heard in their own languages about the wonderful things God had done. The barrier of language was overcome by the Spirit, enabling understanding, bringing unity in diversity and encouraging inclusiveness.

Part of inclusiveness of language for all, and what Pentecost means in practise, is our willingness to stand alongside those who are different and to break down walls which separate us from them.

Words matter and so it matters that we aim to choose words which seek to include rather than exclude. Christians haven't always done this. We have spoken of our religion as the only way to truth. We have spoken of God as male only, and used exclusive male pronouns, he, him and his. We have described a God who is for some and against others.

Not only must we learn to speak in an inclusive language of love we must also, perhaps more importantly, learn to listen in a inclusive language of love.

I had occasion in this last week to speak to someone about inclusion, someone who is concerned that the church isn't being inclusive. It made me want to reach out to that person and people like them in what I know to be that attraction of me as one 'thing', towards them as another 'thing'.

That person would describe themselves as LGBTQ+, representing many other people who have felt judged and condemned by the church for a long time.

[SLIDE] In 2017, the General Assembly agreed to issue an apology to people who are LGBTQ+. Clearly, that apology hasn't really filtered down to a local level. It's not been worked out in practise on the ground. And I think it's an issue we need to address in order to be seen to be more inclusive. I think its an invisible barrier that the Spirit wants taken down.

I realise this is a sensitive issue for many of us and we won't all agree on it but what we can agree on is that we will do all we can to speak and to listen in the language of love, and look for the Divine Presence within all of us.

The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, includes everyone and excludes no one. The Spirit of Christ is the light by which we see all things, and love is the centre of all things, the goal of all things and the energy which holds all things. (Anything that works against that is the anti-Christ).

[SLIDE] On that first day of Pentecost, Peter addressed the crowds telling them that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (2:21). In other words, the Divine Presence of Christ is only a breath away from **every** one.

[SLIDE] Pointing to the Spirit's coming at Pentecost, Jesus described it to his disciples as the presence "who lives with you now and later will be in you" (John 14:17).

The Spirit lives in us to assure us of God's love, to guide us in all truth, to correct us, to point us to God in Christ, to equip us with gifts and cause us to bear fruit and to teach us everything, in the language of Love, the attraction of all things to all things, bringing all diversity of things together in unity.

So may we continue to be filled with the Holy Spirit and follow where the Spirit leads.