

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 31ST MAY 2020, PENTECOST

Anyone who has ever travelled overseas to non-English speaking countries will understand that communication is often difficult when you don't speak the local language. If you remain cocooned in four star hotels where at least the desk staff and waiters speak English you can avoid the challenges of trying to make yourself understood, but if you venture out into the streets and market places you need to get good at miming or hope that some kind person will help you.

A few years ago, I travelled to Turkey on a trip following the steps of St Paul. Most of the time we were with our Turkish guide who could translate for us, but when we ventured into the streets and market places we were on our own. I have to admire the Turkish people for their friendliness and helpfulness to us hapless foreigners. Even in the smallest hamlets the stall holders tried very hard to welcome us and communicate in their few words of English, helped I guess by the fact that many of them had relatives who had settled in Australia.

But the time I most struggled to communicate was in the capital Istanbul when I went out for the day by myself. For most of the day I had managed quite well. I had caught a taxi, visited a church, bought souvenirs and lunch, and navigated my way back to the hotel. But just short of the hotel I decided to buy a can of drink as I was thirsty and also some bottled water to take back to the hotel. I needed bottled water as you can't safely drink the tap water and the hotels charge highly inflated prices for the bottled water (often ten times the price you paid in shops). I found a little hole in the wall shop which had cans of soft drink lined up on the counter. The shop keeper had no English, but when I pointed to one of the cans on the shop counter he got a can out of the refrigerator. So far so good.

Then I tried to ask for bottled water using the few words of Turkish that I had learned. This didn't work. Then I saw some bottled water stacked out the front of the shop. I pointed to it. By gestures I managed to indicate that I wanted a large bottle of water. The shop keeper smiled, got a bottle of water out of the fridge and put my can back in!

I tried to indicate that I wanted both, but I was getting nowhere fast. I felt quite frustrated and impotent until a couple of neighbouring shop keepers came along who knew some English. They offered to translate for me, and thanks to them I was able to buy both my drinks, and as a bonus, half a kilogram of lovely, delicious red cherries. Although it must be said that this later purchase took quite a bit of pantomiming as none of us had the right words in each other's language for cherries or half a kilogram.

All of this was quite exhausting, as have been many similar encounters I have had in other countries. These experiences have given me great admiration for migrants who undertake the challenge of moving to another country where they face the rigors of learning another language.

And it also helps to vividly bring to light what an amazing event Pentecost must have been!

Imagine what it must have been like for all those visitors and pilgrims to Jerusalem who had travelled from all over the Middle East and from further afield for the festival. They would have been enjoying seeing the splendours of the Temple and city, and the pageantry of the festival, but many of them would have been struggling to make themselves understood in the markets, cafes, hostels and inns of the city. This would be because many of them only spoke their local language or dialect. Even the locals spoke a variety of languages – Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin, and their local dialects. This was a very polyglot and confusing place for the visitor.

Imagine then what it must have been like for the crowd to get caught up in this exciting event when the disciples began to fluently preach to them, to each in his or her own language. They must have been utterly astounded!

Imagine how compelling it must have been for that great gathered crowd to stop and listen to what the disciples were saying. And having stopped to listen, to then come under the influence of hearing those wonderful words of love, hope, forgiveness and salvation that Peter and the other disciples were preaching! **The power of God**, at work in Peter and the other disciples must have been something incredible to hear and behold!

The day of Pentecost was a wonderful and very important day as it did three very important things.

Firstly, the movement of the Holy Spirit that day enabled many, many people to hear and believe the good news of the Gospel. As those people came from all over the Middle East and beyond it kicked started the growth of the church across a vast area. This meant that by the time evangelists arrived in new areas they often found a few believers who were already seeking to start church groups and were very open to further teaching.

Secondly, it gave great confidence and assurance to the disciples and other followers of Jesus **and gave them the power and will to undertake the work of evangelism**. As William Willimon said, "The Holy Spirit is the engine that drives the church out into the world." Without the Holy Spirit, the early church would not have prevailed against all those that opposed her. The Holy Spirit empowered, enlightened, guided and strengthened Peter, and all the early church leaders in their very difficult task of establishing and growing the church in a very hostile world. And over all the centuries since that time, the Holy Spirit has continued to empower, enlighten, guide and strength all Christians who were/are seeking to do God's work.

And thirdly, Pentecost also gave the disciples and early followers of Christ an experience that would strengthen them and comfort them in times of trial, as they now knew something of the power of God to lead and sustain them.

It might be helpful to pause for a moment and think about power in the context of Pentecost.

Power can be used in at least two ways: it can be unleashed, or it can be harnessed. The energy in forty litres of petrol, for instance, can be released explosively by dropping a lighted match into the can. Or it can be channelled through the engine of my Toyota Corolla in a controlled burn and used to transport me well over 500 kilometres. Explosions are spectacular, but controlled burns have lasting effect, staying power. The Holy Spirit works both ways.

At Pentecost, she exploded on the scene; her presence was like "tongues of fire" (Acts 2:3). Thousands were affected by one burst of God's power. But God also works through the church -the institution God began to tap the Holy Spirit's power for the long haul. Through worship, fellowship, and service, Christians are provided with staying power.

I was thinking about this today when I received a mailing from the Leprosy Mission. In it was a newsletter that focused on celebrating the 50 years of service Trevor and Heather Smith have given to serving God in Thailand at the McKean Leprosy Centre. This is a remarkable achievement and truly a sign of the Holy Spirit giving staying power, especially when you realise that Trevor and Heather have had to face many demanding and difficult challenges over the years.

When they began this work, there were many hundreds of leprosy patients of all ages living at the McKean Centre, many of them with very severe disabilities. Most had been rejected from home and society. Over the next fifteen years, the team at the McKean Centre undertook a wide range of medical activities, reconstructive surgery and rehabilitation, social work and health education in the community, as well as vocational training, counselling, networking and problem solving that led to 900 patients returning to a home and society that would accept them.

Since then, they have continued to house those too disabled and elderly to support themselves, as well looking after marginalized people with disabilities, and continuing with leprosy prevention and treatment work. Heather and Trevor have had their house flooded, have constantly battled termites, snakes and other invading critters, and faced family separation as their children left home to continue their education.

But they have also had the joy of seeing many patients who have been able to build new lives. These patients have been able to have families, share their faith and play key roles in starting new churches, and have served their communities.

Through all this, Heather and Trevor have been guided and upheld by God's Holy Spirit. Heather said that a Bible verse that has helped her through tough times is Proverbs 3:5,6 "Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek His will in all you do and He will direct your paths."

It is the Holy Spirit that has guided and sustained them in their 50 years in Thailand, and it is the Holy Spirit that will do the same for us in our lives, wherever we live. This is something to rejoice in as we celebrate Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

P.S. Heather said in the newsletter that her favourite worship song is 'Christ Alone', which I had fortuitously already chosen (maybe a little nudge from the Spirit) as the final hymn for this service.

Unless the eye catch fire, God will not be seen.
Unless the ear catch fire, God will not be heard.
Unless the tongue catch fire, God will not be named.
Unless the heart catch fire, God will not be loved
Unless the mind catch fire, God will not be known.

William Blake

