

**Pentecost 2020**  
**Sermon video for use by churches in the Bradford Episcopal Area**  
**Bishop Toby**  
**John 20: 19-23; Acts 2:1-21**

It's good to be with you, even if only digitally, at this festival of Pentecost, where we celebrate God's pouring out of his Holy Spirit onto the church. A few churches had asked me to send in a sermon that could be used in their services, and I thought, "Why not make one available more widely to any of our churches in the Bradford Area?"

So, having heard God's word read to us, and as we prepare ourselves to engage with it together, let's pray. I'll lead us in a prayer:

Loving and gracious God, thank you for the gift of your Spirit, poured out on each one of us and on our churches. May your Spirit now move in us as we reflect on that reading that we have heard from the Book of Acts, bringing us closer to you and to the way you see us and our world, for we ask this in the name of Jesus our risen and ascended Lord, Amen.

I wonder how this experience of lockdown has changed the way that you value things. Are there things – or people – which you value more? Maybe there are things that you took for granted before the Virus struck such as being able to go out for a drink with a friend? Maybe you've come to value a particular neighbour who has been ringing you to check you're alright, or someone who has done some shopping for you if you haven't been able to get out?

Or maybe you've discovered a local shop that still has flour, or found that you appreciate a local park or piece of moorland that you've been able to exercise in, or maybe you've even splashed out on a subscription to Netflix?

Lots of things have changed quite dramatically over the last three or four months. The value of a ticket to the FA Cup that was supposed to be played at Wembley last weekend, or shares in the video conferencing app that so many people are now using called Zoom.

And this includes how we as a nation have seen the value of some people and their work in a new way. Many of our so-called 'key workers' for example are among the lowest paid in our society, and yet we are now calling them heroes.

The festival of Pentecost, that we celebrate today, is a festival of re-valuing; of re-thinking what is important and what is not important. Pentecost picks up a theme that runs right through the Bible, of God turning many of our values upside down, in the words of Jesus' mother, Mary, "casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly." (Luke 1:52)

The ancient world was a world of strict hierarchies. If you were the firstborn male, for example, you got rights (and responsibilities) denied to the rest of your siblings. But in the Bible, this hierarchy is always held in tension with God's choice of the underdog. In the Book of Genesis, the first-born is meant to get the ancestral blessing, but God chooses Abel not

his elder brother, Cain; Jacob not Esau. In the book of Exodus, God rescues a bunch of nobodies - slaves oppressed by the might of Egypt - and calls them to be God's chosen people. In the Book of Ruth, a widowed economic migrant becomes the great grandmother of King David and a key part of God's salvation history.

The prophets in the Bible looked forward to a day when God would pour out his Spirit not just on individual kings and priests but on all God's people, a vision that was realised that first Pentecost. God didn't give the Spirit to Peter who then passed it on to James, John and Mary who then passed it on to others; the Spirit was poured out on all the believers gathered there *together*, breaking through barriers of gender, age, social class, ethnicity and nationality.

"Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit... Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

In the Pentecost story, God doesn't only value one of the global languages of the day such as Latin or Greek or the religious language of Hebrew; every home language was valued as the disciples found themselves praising God miraculously in different tongues.

I remember visiting a Bible translation centre in Sudan when I travelled there to make the connection with our link church. It was extraordinarily moving to meet Sudanese Christians from sometimes quite small people groups that the government at the time was bombing and whose children were forbidden to learn their home language in school. Yet for the first time those languages were being honoured and preserved by being written down as the Bible was translated into them.

When onlookers that first Pentecost heard their home languages spoken, saw the tongues of fire and heard the rushing wind, they were amazed wondered what was going on. Peter explained it to them by looking back into Scripture, and by focussing on Jesus. Jesus, as the Psalm foretold, was, "the stone rejected by the builders" that had now, "become the chief cornerstone." (Psalm 118:22) Jesus had been scorned as worthless and crucified outside the city walls. But his rising from the grave had proved that he was indeed Messiah, God's son.

In response, Peter called on his listeners to repent. In the Bible, that word means turning around, changing direction. If God was happy to pour his Spirit, God's very breath and love into even despised slaves that first Pentecost, as the prophesy from Joel made clear and they were experiencing, then how could they continue to look down on each other in the way that society had taught them?

Repentance meant getting baptised into God's grace and forgiveness, and joining a movement of people who would share their wealth with one another and be a blessing to those around them. A movement of people who would be committed to seeing Jesus, the crucified Messiah, in the face of prisoners and dying people and those who so many considered worthless.

Friends, maybe this horrible virus, Covid19, is something of a wake-up call to us, to our world and our own nation in the Spirit of Pentecost. As many have pointed out, it's not good enough simply to clap key workers without asking what it means to really value them and the work they do to keep us healthy and fed and protected.

I have heard more than once from senior executives that their office staff sometimes see a different side of official visitors when the visitor is not in the presence of someone they consider important.

It was a nation that had learned to value foreign NHS workers in a new way because of the Virus that forced the government to make its recent u-turn on sur-charging them to use the very NHS that that they served.

Similarly, it's not good enough simply to rejoice at the cleaner air over our cities caused by the lockdown without asking what it really means to value the environment and keep that air clean in the long term. Again, that's a question for us personally and as families and parishes, and our Diocese has some clear and simple pledges that are worth looking at on the diocesan website. But it's also a political question as we are forced to make difficult and costly decisions as a society about which industries and infrastructure projects we want to support in the coming months and years.

These are big questions, and it's easy for us to feel powerless in the face of huge social injustice and the challenge of catastrophic global warming. But God values you and me and the church more than we often value ourselves. God has always done extraordinary things through ordinary people like you and me.

We are sometimes so fixated on our faith in God that we forget how much faith God has in us. Having embraced Christ and been baptised into his death and resurrection, God sees us as the first-fruits of his new creation as Jesus breathes the Spirit into our minds and muscles. "Very truly I tell you," says Jesus, "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12)

It has always been God's way to change the world like a baker makes bread: introducing a small and seemingly insignificant amount of yeast into the batch of dough. The power of the Spirit who moved over the face of the waters at creation, Jesus now breathes into you and me; into your parish church and mine; into our groaning prayers and our acts of service. Yeast worked into the dough; salt worked into the food to keep it free of germs; light shining in the darkness.

My prayer for us this Pentecost is that God's Spirit, poured out on each one of us, will help us to see other people, our planet, ourselves and our churches increasingly through the eyes of Jesus. So that the good, Kingdom re-valuing that we have experienced amidst the suffering is not lost, but grows and flourishes in the power of God's love.