

St George's, Jesmond
Choral Evensong on the Feast of Pentecost
Sunday 20th May 2018

It would, I think, be true to say that my life is defined by four days: 29th August and 12th October 1958; 29th September 1985; and 7th April 1994. While there will be others for whom one or more of those days is deeply significant, they were days when, for most people, the life of the world went on in its normal way. People went to school and to work; engaged in leisure activities; did the shopping; prepared meals; washed the dishes.

For me, however, those four days were life-changing days, the effects of which have touched every single subsequent day of my life. On the first I was born; on the second I was baptised; on the third I was ordained priest; and on the fourth I became the legal guardian of a ten-year old boy.

Each of those four events happened to me once – at a precise moment on a particular day, long in the past. Yet each of those four days is not just a *then* event; each is also a *now* event. For those four days are about what it means to be me.

Each of you will be able to identify such days in your past, days which have determined the person you are now. We are talking about days which have shaped our journey and formed our identity; days which are at the heart of our individual stories.

To be a Christian is to place our individual stories within another, much greater story: a story which has five forming, shaping, determining days; days when, for the overwhelming majority of the human race, the life of the world went on in its normal way, but days which are at the heart of that story which we believe to reveal the truth about the world; days which are not just *then* events, but also *now* events; days which have the power to change and shape lives now. The first we call Christmas Day; the second, Good Friday; the third, Easter Day; the fourth, Ascension Day; and the fifth, which we celebrate today, the Feast of Pentecost.

Five days and five stories, each containing a profound and mysterious truth. The truth of Christmas Day is that, in the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ, God himself enters our world and shows us that he is with us and by our side; Emmanuel, God with us. The truth of Good Friday is that, in Christ, God reveals the nature and 'the extent of his love by making himself vulnerable, and [shows us that he] is at one with us in all the mess and muddle of human suffering' (Michael Mayne, *To trust and to love: Sermons and addresses*, p75). The truth of Easter Day is of the creative power of God, that creative power which at the beginning called the world into being and gave the gift of life, that creative power which in the resurrection of Jesus Christ shows that it can and does bring life out of death, that death does not have the final word.

The truth of Ascension Day is about a change in how Jesus is present among his people. One kind of presence gives way to another: no longer limited by time and space; no longer visible to his disciples; but now a life-giving Spirit in their midst. For Jesus has been raised, not only from the dead, but also far above all cosmic powers. He is the one who 'ascended far above all things, so that he might fill all things', as

the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians puts it (Ephesians 4:10). The truth here is that there is no part of the universe that in the end is not to come under his sovereignty; for it is, says the writer to the Ephesians, God's plan 'for the fulness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth' (Ephesians 1:10).

Ascension Day gives us a big vision. The vision is of the ultimate triumph of God's love over every other force in creation. It is a vision which would have been stillborn had it not been for 'the readiness of those first Christians, in their first glimmering recognition of what God was doing in Christ, to wait in the city for [the] fifth day', the Day of Pentecost (Michael Mayne, *To trust and to love: Sermons and addresses*, p77) – the day when God gave the gift of his Holy Spirit. 'Wait in the city', said Jesus, 'until you have been clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24.49).

The Day of Pentecost was the day when the first Christians realized that Christ had kept his word: 'I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.....[And w]hen the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.....and he will declare to you the things that are to come' (John 16:7 and 13). Christ kept his word. And he continues to keep his word – for this is not just a then matter but a now matter. He continues to keep his word – and comes to us, in our daily waiting upon him.

Pentecost, the feast of the Holy Spirit, speaks to us of the vocation which, by virtue of our baptism, we all share – the vocation to 'open our minds and our hearts to [God's] Holy Spirit and so to follow his example and act in his Spirit that we begin to live here and now the new life of the Kingdom of God' (Michael Mayne, *Alleluia is our song*, p73).

We learn to be open to the Holy Spirit, not in lonely isolation, but in and through our membership of, and participation in, the Church of God, which is the Body of Christ. It is through the Christian community to which we belong – the community with whom we worship, break bread, pray, study and serve – that the Holy Spirit comes to us and nurtures us.

This community speaks with many different tongues – for the community to which we belong is part of a worldwide community. This worldwide community is a community with different tongues; but it is also a community with a common language. A common language which on the Day of Pentecost was understood by, among others, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia. A common language that can be heard today the world over. For is there not a common human language, heard in the music of Bach and Mozart, heard in words of forgiveness, glimpsed in the act of going to the aid of a wounded stranger? Is there not a language more powerful than words? There is a universal language, and it is the language of love.

The chief work of the Holy Spirit is to teach us this universal language. And it does so by opening our eyes to see in a new way. To see the world, not as a random and purposeless accident, but as the creation of a loving God, a God who created for a purpose – that all into whom he has breathed the breath of life may come to share his divine life and divine love. To see ourselves and each other as God's children – sinful,

yes, falling short of the glory of God, yes; but loved, valued and forgiven. And to see Christ as a living and contemporary presence – a presence in and through his Holy Spirit. For, as Michael Mayne puts it: ‘The Word that was once made flesh is now made Spirit’ (Michael Mayne, *Alleluia is our song*, p84).

Pentecost, the fifth of our five days, is part of a larger narrative about the nature and purposes of God. The God who is a Trinity of Persons is active, generous, sacrificial love, reaching out to the whole of creation and seeking to bring it into fellowship with himself. The story of this reaching out stretches from the sending of the Word to become incarnate in Jesus, through the crucifixion on Good Friday and the resurrection on Easter Day, to the Ascension, and from the Ascension to the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – the Spirit whose work is the transformation of the creation until all things are gathered up in the fellowship of the living God.

Pentecost may be the fifth of our five days, but it is not an end; rather is it a beginning – the beginning of a new vocation; the vocation to be open to God’s Holy Spirit that we may be enabled to see with new eyes and new hearts, and with these eyes and hearts to be instruments and channels of God’s life and light and love. Amen.

The Revd Canon Steven Harvey