

Pentecost Sunday on the Platinum Jubilee Weekend  
(Acts 2:1-21, Genesis 11:1-9, John 14:8-17)

This weekend has been a weekend of celebration. And I wonder how *you've* been celebrating the Queen's Platinum Jubilee? *I* commemorated the stability and longevity of the Queen's rule by going to Lord's to watch England's contrastingly fleeting and fragile batting line-up, as they yet again collapsed against New Zealand... Although, they turned it around yesterday... and trust that as I speak, Joe Root is finishing the job!

But this weekend is a weekend of celebration for the Church too, and not just because of the Queen's 70-year service as head of the Church of England. But also, because this weekend we celebrate Pentecost, or Whitsunday, as the birthday of the church, with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus' followers.

Pentecost is *regarded* as the birth of the church, as people from all backgrounds and nations were filled with the Holy Spirit. Descending like fire, the Spirit set the hearts of Jesus' followers ablaze with love for him. As a result, the church spread like wildfire to all parts of the world.

From the humble beginnings of a small band of followers, located in a marginal part of the Roman Empire, this fire has spread across land and generations, so that today even our Queen professes such faith in the risen Jesus.

Both inside and outside the church, people will have varying degrees of comfort with having a monarch as Supreme Head of the Church of England. But the very nature of our established church is a reminder that, as Jesus put it, "the Spirit blows where it wills." God's church continues to take form across nations, across cultures, in different times and in different contexts. Prince and pauper alike, drawn in by the one Spirit, receive the universal invitation of the Gospel.

However, even though it is the same Spirit that draws us into Christ's church and abides in each of us as members of his Body, this does not mean colourless conformity.

This is the mistake of Babel. We see a tower being built, a unified, singular route to heaven; one culture, one language, consolidated in this city that wanted to "make a name for itself." I don't think this is so much a primitive story about an insecure god who is afraid of human achievement. But rather, an allegory that warns us about human attempts to control and impose uniformity. We might see Babel's intentions in direct contradiction

of God's call to the first man and woman to "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth" (1:28), an instruction reiterated again after the flood. We might therefore see the "confusion" of language and scattering that ensues not as a curse, but a blessing.

Indeed, in Acts we see that the gift of the Spirit, does not mean a life of bland sameness and conformity— but unity-in-difference. Each is given a tongue, each a language, that could be heard by Jews of every nation passing by.

The church community ablaze with the Spirit described in Acts is a visible sign and image for us, that following Jesus is not about being drawn into something cloned or colourless, but is a vibrant life of diversity held together by the one Spirit.

In this sense, the church reflects the image of the Triune God (as Jesus describes for us, in John's gospel). Just as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, though different persons, dwell together as One God, so as the Spirit abides in us, though we are many, we are one Body. (And as we look towards Trinity Sunday we might ask how much that is a reality in our own local expression of Christ's Body?).

But what does this mean?

I think I encountered this truth perhaps most profoundly when I met some ordinands, (priests-in-training) at Cambridge. I was studying theology at the time but had no real idea of what I'd be doing with my life. But through getting to know one ordinand, Michael, hanging out with him after class as we had coffee, and he smoked through a packet of cigarettes, cracking jokes, and providing a very amusing insight into life at theological college, it opened the possibility of the priesthood for me. It showed me that to be a priest didn't mean being a carbon-copy Christian, or that I would have to entirely alter who I was.

Up until that point, I think my view had been that I couldn't be a priest because I wasn't holy enough, or not like most people who seemed to end up as a priest. But spending time with Michael showed me that, whilst the work of the Holy Spirit means the ongoing transformation of many parts of my life, being called to the priesthood, meant being called, as *I am*. Being called as me, *Sam*— not some imagined version of myself.

I wonder if any of this strikes true for any of you? The realisation that being a Christian, and being moulded more and more into Christ's image,

isn't about being *less who you are*, but more fully who God has made you to be!

C.S. Lewis described it well when he wrote;

To become new creations means losing what we now call "ourselves." Out of ourselves, into Christ, we must go. His will is to become ours and we are to think His thoughts, to "have the mind of Christ" as the Bible says. And if Christ is one, and if He is thus to be "in" us all, shall we not be exactly the same? It certainly sounds like it; but in fact it is not so.

Imagine a lot of people who have always lived in the dark. You come and try to describe to them what light is like. You might tell them that if they come into the light that same light would fall on them all and they would all reflect it and thus become what we call visible. Is it not quite possible that they would imagine that, since they were all receiving the same light, and all reacting to it in the same way (i.e. reflecting it), they would all look alike? Whereas you and I know that the light will in fact bring out, or show up, how different they are.

Or again, suppose a person who knew nothing about salt. You give him a pinch to taste and he experiences a particular strong, sharp taste. You then tell him that in your country people use salt in all their cookery. Might he not reply "In that case I suppose all your dishes taste exactly the same: because the taste of that stuff you have just given me is so strong that it will kill the taste of everything else." But you and I know that the real effect of salt is exactly the opposite. So far from killing the taste of the egg and the trip and the cabbage, it actually brings it out. They do not show their real taste till you have added the salt.

This describes the radical work of the Spirit. Drawing us together into one Body, the church, diverse and different, held together in unity, not uniformity. Like a stain-glass window, though many different shards and colours, it is the same light shining through each, that comes together to make one picture. (Or, like the many, multi-coloured, fire-works going off last night, yet all a part of one celebration!)

So, as we celebrate her Majesty's reign and service over these last 70 years, which has impacted so many people of differing nations, languages,

and cultures. Let us give thanks too that she counts herself as a member of an even more universal and diverse Kingdom, rendering herself subject to the highest Majesty.

And may each of us as members of Christ's church, continue to be open to his Spirit burning within us, setting our hearts on fire, and transforming us more and more into who we are called to be, that we might refract God's kaleidoscopic glory.

Amen.