

Pentecost Sunday, May 20th 2018
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sermon preached by the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich
The Right Reverend Martin Seeley
Texts: Acts 2: 1-21; John 15: 26-27, 16: 4b-15

I imagine most of us are still in the after-glow of the Royal Wedding, and maybe even in spite of ourselves, found we were caught up in the gift of the day, a great celebration, which as Presiding Bishop Michael Curry powerfully reminded us and the nearly 2bn people watching, was a celebration of love and so a celebration of God.

And today, almost as if it was planned, we slip seamlessly into Pentecost, the celebration of the coming of God's Spirit on the first disciples, transforming them and sending them out in the power of that Spirit – which is the Spirit of love. This is the birthday of the Church, whose only purpose is to show and share God's love.

Back in 1977 I moved to the US to continue my theological studies, and before I went my wise and astute vicar said to me, "Your understanding of the extent of God's salvation and the extent of God's love will expand."

I wasn't quite sure what he meant, but I soon found out it he was right, not because it was the US, but because by living in a different place among different people and a different culture I saw that my understanding of God had been well, small, and now it was being quite dramatically expanded. So God loves all these people too, who are in many ways so different, but no less loved.

As a youngster who had never lived abroad, to do so then was to realise the world was much bigger and God was much bigger than I had experienced up until then. And I encountered people experiencing and responding to human need, people embracing hope,

people trusting in God's providence, in ways I had not recognised back home. My understanding of God's salvation and God's love expanded.

And of course, people making the journey in reverse say just the same. Christians coming here whether from the US or any other country will say the same. Each time we step out into the unknown, embrace the unfamiliar, make a choice for something new, our understanding of the extent of God's salvation and of God's love expand.

But you don't have to travel abroad for this to happen. Each person newly coming to faith, or each time we have one of those transformative experiences that move us in a sort of step change in our developing faith, each time our sense of God's love expands. Our sense of God gets bigger, and we see the world God embraces by his salvation is bigger than we thought.

Which is what Pentecost is. By the coming of the Spirit our sense of God gets bigger and of God's salvation and God's love expands. All the images of Pentecost are about expansion. The rushing wind comes in from beyond where we are and blows out beyond where we are, catching us up in a world much larger than the one we see around us.

The tongues of fire race outwards, catching alight all they touch, a symbol of God's expansive Spirit, of the extending power of God's fiery love, catching everyone.

And the image in John's Gospel, in the passage we just heard, we are told that the Spirit of truth will guide us into all truth – the truth we know at the present is not all the truth – truth expands too, increases, and we are being led on that journey too - expanding our understanding, changing us, taking us where perhaps we are afraid to go, but guiding us into God's truth of love for all.

And then there is the powerful image of language. The people from across the known world on that Pentecost could hear the disciples speaking each in their own native

language. This is not a love just for those who know the language, who speak the right way, who know the lingo. Everyone understood that day. Everyone heard God's words for them. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs, they heard each in their own language God's deeds of power.

The message of God's salvation and our realisation that God's love is not bound by human groupings, by language, by culture, by difference expands at Pentecost. Everyone is swept up in the embrace of God's love.

We know what it is like to be in a place where we do not understand the language. We might try to communicate, but we can easily be thwarted. And you may have had the experience of being somewhere where you not only did not know the language, but there was no one around to help you understand, and everything seemed very strange, very unfamiliar.

It is not just the language you don't understand, but the ways of the people you are among, their culture, the signals we read without words are no longer there, and you can feel quite alone.

And we may speak the same language but simply not understand one another because socially or culturally we are so far apart. We have only to think about our national life over the past couple of years to realise how those divisions of culture can run very deep, where people do not understand why one person seems so different, behaves so differently, thinks so differently, than themselves and the gap is far deeper than words. We do not understand one another and the world got smaller. God's expanding embrace has become less clear, less obvious.

The poor in our land include those who are not heard, whose voices are ignored, whose language neighbours or those who hold power in their lives have not thought to learn, and so neither hears the other. That was one of the appalling lessons of Grenfell Tower.

But each heard them speaking in their own language. Whose languages do we not understand, in our own neighbourhood, our own communities, our own land? Who do we think does not understand us? How do we reach across those divides so that we may together know the expanding reach of God's love?

This is hard. It is hard for all of us, because it means being open to learn these different languages, these different cultures, ways of life. We tend – whoever we are – to expect people to learn our ways, our words, not that we learn each others.

And of course when we learn each others' we change. We are not the same. They don't become like us, to fit in with our ways, our words. Together we become different, new, and each sees the expanding embrace of God's love in the other.

We can and do try and get the rest to fit in with us. Churches try this. Do come and join us, we would love to have you among us - and become just like us. Yet that is not what Pentecost is about. If it were the Scripture would not read, "Each heard them speaking in their own language" but "Each discovered they had instantaneously learned Aramaic, the language of those Galilean fishermen".

The first expands the world, the second contracts it. God is about expansion. We listen to one another – really listen – and as we learn each other's language and culture through our listening, we hear the words of God's power and love.

Like those first Pentecost disciples, we step out, we reach out, we engage with different people and together learn how God is changing us all. We break down barriers of language, culture, and those humanly reinforced prejudices and fears, [which in the church are

tragically reinforced when we use Scripture as a wall not a window, a weapon not a balm.]
By the power of God's Spirit, we form bonds of love and friendship across gulfs that had seemed uncrossable. We step out into the unknown, embrace the unfamiliar, feel uncomfortable and then realise that these are the growing pains of living in God's expansive love.

This is Pentecost. God's Spirit in us, expanding who we are, how we are, opening us up to the new and unfamiliar ways of God, sending us out to share our expanding experience of God's love and God's salvation for everyone.

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