**THE LANGUAGE OF THE SPIRIT**

**Sermon preached for 10.00am Sung Eucharist**

**St. Edmundsbury Cathedral**

**Sunday 31 May 2020**

**Pentecost**

One of my children would have been taking GCSEs now, including Spanish. His brother took German. His sister has chosen French. These linguistic abilities definitely come from their mother who speaks three languages and can get by in at least two more. Kate is convinced that the ability to speak languages comes down to hard work and putting in the graft to learn. I have yet to persuade her that not everybody shares her natural ability. If you can speak more than one language, like our Acts readers this morning, I applaud you.

Different languages are at the heart of our Pentecost story. People from different nations being able to understand Peter whatever their native language. It’s an amazing miracle and it’s a wonderful image. The Spirit of God bringing unity and common understanding.

There’s a connection of course to the tower of Babel – the story in the Hebrew Bible. The people building a tower to heaven are thrown into confusion when God stops their communication by making them speak different languages. Today at Pentecost we celebrate the reverse: the Spirit of God bringing unity and common understanding.

It is deeply enriching to worship with Christians who speak different languages. Lee Abbey is a Christian community in Devon that attracts people from all over the world. I went to a summer camp at Lee Abbey as a teenager. During some prayers we were invited to say the Lord’s Prayer in our own language. It was the first time I had heard the Lord’s Prayer in a language other than English. You may know the Pater Noster Church outside Jerusalem with the Lord’s Prayer around its walls in 140 languages.

How Peters listeners could understand in their own language we don’t know. Perhaps his message was so compelling it transcended language barriers. Perhaps it was a mystical experience that transcended time and space. There are of course some messages that do transcend language barriers. Love, peace, kindness, generosity and so on. St Paul lists the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control

The coronavirus is no respecter of borders or language divides. It’s a common experience around the world, uniting all of the human family. I don’t mean it is the great leveller that some have described it says, far from it. But one of the remarkable aspects of the pandemic is how it affects everyone in the world. Our news has been full of images of various places around the world: capital cities with empty streets; images of people suffering in hospitals in many countries. As Dumbledore says to Harry Potter “Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open."

Perhaps one of the positive legacies of the pandemic will be a deeper sense of our common humanity and shared purpose. After all the Spirit of God is not just for Christians. One of the blessings of this pandemic has been seeing the fruits of the Spirit reported in the news. New charities providing food for NHS staff. People supporting vulnerable people. The weekly clap for the NHS and key workers: loving, kind appreciation for the generosity, faithfulness and self-control of so many.

We can learn the fruits of the Spirit and like languages we can practice them. Like learning a language, the fruits of the Spirit need a lot of practice. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This lockdown gives plenty of opportunities for practising these fruits of the Spirit. Joy when feeling anxious and uncertain - gratitude helps. Patience when living with uncertainty and waiting for lockdown to end. Kindness to neighbours in need, kindness to people who are isolated and vulnerable. Generosity towards charities and foodbanks. Faithfulness when living with questions for God about what is going on. Self-control in stressful situations cooped up with the family 24/7 or self-control when tempted to comfort eat and drink. Kindness towards those close to us.

The words we use are one of the main ways we express these fruits of the Spirit. Regularly during the day we can choose words that are loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, generous and so on. We need to be attentive. Sometimes our negative feelings get the better of us. We can use words to show off our knowledge, to win an argument, to manipulate, to hurt. We use professional languages: medical, legal, religious. And its not just adults. Young people, very young children learn to speak for their own gain. I remember one of my children as a 2 year old, could clearly say “mine”.

He could also say “share”. But telling you to share something really meant “for me”. We need to be attentive and use language with care.

And we can practice on ourselves. Just as we make mistakes when learning to speak another language, so we get things wrong when living the fruits of the Spirit. How do we respond? We can smile, be kind to ourselves, be gentle with ourselves, be patient, and try again.

To learn a language we need a good teacher. In learning the language of the Spirit, its encouraging to remember that the Spirit of God is our teacher. Today we call on the Spirit to enter our lives more fully. The Spirit is always close to us, always ready to support our learning in the language of God.

*Canon Matthew Vernon*

*Canon Pastor & Sub Dean*