

Pentecost Sunday, 23 May 2021

Psalm 104.26 to the end, John 15.26-27 & 16. 4b-5 Acts 2.1-21

When the Advocate comes, he will testify on my behalf.

This morning on this great feast of Pentecost I want to begin by looking at the word Jesus uses to describe the Holy Spirit at the beginning of today's Gospel, which is translated in our Bible (the New Revised Standard Version) as advocate. Who or what do you think of when you hear the word advocate? Most of us will think of a lawyer who speaks on behalf of his client in court as he or she gives voice to their defence. If you were working in the drinks industry you will surely think of the Dutch liqueur Advocaat, which is made with egg yolks, aromatic herbs, honey, brandy, vanilla and cream. A 19th century Dutch dictionary claimed it was named Advocaat (advocate) as it is "a good lubricant for the throat, and thus considered especially useful for a lawyer, who must speak in public".

Speaking on behalf of, speaking with authority, speaking in public, speaking without hesitation, speaking well – these all point us in a specific direction about the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church, as well as in the world. We understand that the Advocate that Jesus promises enables speech, to speak on behalf of, to proclaim. Let's dig a little deeper and look briefly at the etymology of the word advocate. It means literally to voice or to speak and with a little imagination it means "to give voice to". If we understand the word advocate in this way it means God's Spirit is given to enable speaking. What are we to give voice to? We are to give voice to the things of God – or better as in today's Acts reading – God's deeds of power. Left to our own devices it is difficult to speak of the things of God with authority, let alone with authenticity and consistency so that we may bear fruit – fruit that will last. As we abide in Jesus.

This thought "of giving voice to" serves as a bridge and takes us to the wondrous picture drawn by the author of the Book of Acts. In the miracle of tongues the Spirit, the advocate does give voice to all those who are gathered and waiting in the upper room. The scene concludes with Peter speaking to the people gathered in Jerusalem, those who have witnessed this strange event, reassuring them that they haven't been drinking Advocaat since before daybreak as they assume.

I warm to the picture drawn by the author of Acts as we see people driven by the Holy Spirit out into the streets of Jerusalem which we imagine is bustling with people going about their business and who are more than just a little perplexed by this motley bunch of Jewish Galileans spilling out onto the streets during the Jewish festival of Shavuot, whose origins are located in the spring harvest. Let's hold onto

the fact that the Giving of the Holy Spirit occurs during the first harvest celebration of the year. Perhaps it is helpful for me to confess that it took me a while as a child to grasp that harvest doesn't only take place in the autumn at the Harvest Festival or Harvest Thanksgiving, but throughout the year. Down the centuries people have been harvesting the year round different crops, fruits and vegetables... possibly most impressively in Egypt after the spring flooding of the banks of the Nile.

I love hearing and over the years locating the various places from which the people have gathered in Jerusalem for the festival from far and wide, from within and from without the Roman Empire. Given our recent study of the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, I highlight this year Mesopotamia, home to the great city of Babylon, where there was a Jewish community from at least the Great Deportation in 597 BC or BCE if you prefer and from which Jews under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah would return to rebuild the Temple, the habitations, the walls of the city and a way of life centred around the Law of Moses. Pentecost, the outpouring of the Spirit is not a rebuilding, a reclaiming or a reconstruction, but rather a life centred around the life-giving Spirit of God, who makes the life of Jesus known: his teaching, his example, his miracles and his story.

What characterised Babylon? Was it a city of many languages, tongues I wonder as in a babble of tongues? In its heyday it was a city of 200,000 people. The size of Plymouth, England; Graz, Austria; Lübeck, Germany; Klaipėda, Lithuania; Laredo, USA; Regina, Canada; Welkom, SA; Owo or Potiskum, Nigeria; Tamale, Ghana; Kenema, Sierra Leone; Thika, Kenya; Mbarara, Uganda; Gaborone, Botswana; Portmore, Jamaica; Moratuwa, Sri Lanka; Gandhinagar, India; Fargona, Uzbekistan; etc.

The Jewish diaspora in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost is the means by which the word of God, the new thing God is doing initially spreads across the world thereby fulfilling its vocation to make known the God of mercy, compassion and steadfast love, slow to anger of great goodness, (Psalm 145.8) who has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live. (Ezekiel 33.11) The Jewish diaspora that day is being given a voice to tell of God's good purposes and thereby be a light to the world.

The narrative we know from the Acts of the Apostles and for which we are grateful is built around two shining figures Peter and Paul, but today enables us to see – as important as these Apostles are – that there is a symphony of voices that tells of God's deeds of power. The narrative of the Acts of the Apostles tells a story of a gradual spread, but the narrative now goes on to tell of a spread that prepares the way for the Peters and the Pauls then and today. These men and women from across the diaspora will return to their homes not only telling of the things of Jesus

(God's deeds of power), but also of how the Galileans were empowered, were given voice to speak with ability of the things of Jesus in tongues differing from their own. As an aside it is the people of the diaspora who tell us in our reading what those who are filled with the Holy Spirit are saying, "... in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.

A close reading of the text makes it clear that it is Galileans who have received the outpouring of the Spirit that gives them voices to tell of God's deeds of power and gives life to the words of the prophet Joel on the day. A promise fulfilled. The people comment amazed and astonished, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" The subversive ministry that begins with Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee continues with his Galilean followers. How does Peter address those who think they have been drinking Advocaat: Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem... ". Think of all the people Jesus has engaged with during his ministry, who were opposed to him, they came from Jerusalem these too are being addressed. The authorities sought to silence him. Putting him to death was the answer, but here it has all sprung to life never to be silenced. I am reminded of the hymn *The Lord of the Dance*. Jesus in the hymn is the Lord of the Dance. "They cut me down and I leapt up high; I am the life that'll never, never die; I'll live in you If you'll live in me - I am the Lord of the Dance, said he."

Let's return to the word translated in in our bibles as Advocate, which some leave as Paraclete, because the Greek word Paraclete parakletos is rather like wind that won't allow itself to be pinned down. Let's note that the noun Paraclete is related to a verb that means "I call alongside". The Paraclete is the companion that Jesus calls on to come alongside his followers as helper, counsellor, empowerer, comforter, advocate and guide enabling them to have a voice, a voice in the public realm the streets of Jerusalem. Think of Jesus coming alongside the two disciples who are fleeing Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24.32) The imagery of the fire returns today as we celebrate Pentecost. "Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them."

What does this day mean for us? As we draw to a close I quote a commentator on the Acts text. "The reality of Pentecost is that our world at this moment is God-drenched." I wouldn't put it like that, but the comment reminds me that God is always at the ready to pour out his Spirit on all those who open themselves to receiving it and as in St Paul's case even those who aren't ready for it. And the call to each and every person and to each and every Christian anew is to open themselves to the life-giving spirit as we are surrounded by a culture committed to fragmentation, defined by fear and pervaded by a culture of death. It is for us to

open ourselves to the possibility of God tearing open the heavens “to let the sun shine in”. It is to open ourselves so that we can be renewed by a fresh outpouring of the Spirit. The most important thing I am going to say regarding opening ourselves is that we have to let go. Let go of bitterness, of past hurts, of allowing ourselves to be defined by victimhood, of life isn't fair, of thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought, of having our own way, of hardness of heart, of receiving but never giving to name some.

God's Paraclete, the advocate, the one who gives voice, is not confined to one moment in time. It is through that moment, the Day of Pentecost that we see the possibilities of the present moment that leave us amazed and astonished and expectant. Remember the words of Jesus he speaks to Nicodemus. “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3.8)