

Pentecost Reading: Acts 2:1-21, Genesis 11:19

Holy Spirit move in my words and in our hearts. In Christ's name. Amen

One of my favourite TV programmes is Star Trek. I don't want to sound like a nerd, but I love it in all its forms - the original series, the movies 'Deep Space Nine' and 'The Next Generation'. If you watch enough of it, two things stand out. First, the guy in the red shirt always gets it. When you beam down don't do it wearing a red shirt. The other amazing fact is that, wherever you go in the universe, everyone speaks American. It doesn't matter how many eyes, green heads or fuzzy tails the aliens have, they still speak American.

Our first reading today is a really remarkable story. The story is from Genesis. It is just after the flood and human society is just beginning to establish itself. All of humanity settles in one place, speaks one language and begins to build one tower. But God's will is that we populate the whole earth. So he moves them out of their comfort zone, beyond their fortress mentality, and scatters them across the face of the earth. It is God's will that they have different languages to reflect their diversity. This feels like a punishment, but really, as we know on a good day, different languages and races are a part of the richness of being human. There are 52 separate restaurants at Bush Inn, one for each week of the year. Imagine how boring it would be if everyone only had meat and three veg.

While we have the blessing of cultural diversity, we also have the curse of no universal language, or do we? Along comes Pentecost. Pentecost is the coming of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus promised. Pentecost (from the Greek *pentekostos*, meaning fiftieth), comes fifty days after Easter and the Resurrection. The Spirit appears as fire and His first gift rolls back the curse of Babel. Each hears the Good News in their heart language. Contrary to what is often said, Pentecost is not the day when people understand one another by speaking the same language, rather each hears in his own native tongue. The Spirit enables them to understand. The Spirit gives unity but He preserves diversity. The Spirit gives them the courage to proclaim God's great love seen best in Jesus Christ. Pentecost is the birthday of the church.

But, what of us? What language do we have to tell the community of God's love? Even here at St Peter's we have many whose native tongue is not English. Is there a universal language we can speak that all will understand? There is only one language that everyone understands. Is it Mandarin? No. Is it Spanish? No. Is it English? Even if you yell it really, really loudly, as they suggest on 'Fawlty Towers', will everyone understand?

We in the church have a special language given to us by Jesus own life and commanded by Him. We even have a special theological name for the language Jesus taught us. We call it love. Every person ever born and ever to be born understands this language. We don't have a monopoly on it but we have the Source of it. For God, right at the beginning and deep in the human soul, has put a need to receive and a need to give this language. A loving action speaks when words fail. A simple act of love goes ahead of us when human language and culture fail us.

Legend has it, that a missionary lost at sea was, by chance, washed up out of the sea on the edge of a remote village. Half dead from starvation, exposure and sea water, he was found by the people of the village and was nursed back to health. Subsequently, he lived among these people for 20 years. He couldn't speak their language and during that whole time he confessed no faith. He uttered no songs. He preached no sermons. He neither read nor recited any scripture. He made no faith claim. But when the people were sick he attended to them, sitting long into the night. When the people were hungry he gave them food. When the people were lonely, he was a source of company. He taught the ignorant. He always took the side of the poor and the vulnerable. After 20 years other missionaries came from the sea and began talking about a man called Jesus. The local people listened. Then they said, "We know this man of whom you have been speaking". They led the missionaries to a hut where their long lost fellow missionary was alive and well.

You see, the language of love, which is the gift of the Spirit, is not spoken with our tongues but by our lives. Love says little but does much. Love is spoken in a thousand ways, few of them with words. St Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel always, if necessary use words".

But there is a little sting in the tail. As Anglicans we do the softly, softly very well, but sometimes we are called to give the name to what we do. Believe it or not Anglican Care is the biggest NGO in the country. But we have a shyness problem here in our own city where the City Mission is afraid to use the word Anglican. We are the complete opposite of the Salvation Army. The Salvation Army has a problem convincing people they are a worshipping church. We have problem convincing people we do anything else.

At Pentecost, like those first disciples, we are given fresh courage. We are given fresh courage to live lives of love: to be alongside, being Christ to the community. We are also given the courage to name our love for what it is. All the chaplaincy, all the counselling, all the food parcels, the emergency housing, the social justice advocacy, the night shelters and the pastoral care,

you name it, we do it. We do it not for our own sake but for the King of Love.
We do it in Christ's name, and for Christ's glory.