

Genesis 11.1-9; Acts 2.1-21; John 14.8-17(25-27)

As you may have seen in the notices, we may be having a parish trip to the Holy Land in 2021. It is an amazing place. Tiny geographically. It's about the size of Wales. But brim full of history and significance. For us as Christians of course it is the place where Jesus lived and ministered and there is something extraordinary about being in the places where he would have been. Seeing some of the sights that he would have seen. And imagining what it would have been like when he walked the earth. But this tiny strip of land is also important to Jews and Muslims of course and its modern history is almost as fascinating as its past. So I hope that our visit will help us to better understand the Holy Land today as well as what happened in Jesus' time.

At the heart of this amazing country is the city of Jerusalem of course. Sacred to Jews, Muslims and Christians. The site of the Temple where observant Jews still pray at the western wall. On Temple Mount is the dome of the rock, the third most holy site in Islam. And of course Christians have the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the traditional site of Jesus' tomb and resurrection. All of this significance creates a unique sense of spiritual intensity. There are so many faithful people concentrated in one place that it is not hard to conceive of Jerusalem being thought of as God's footstool on earth. A place of encounter with the divine. A place that has always and will always attract the faithful.

Today people come to Jerusalem from all over the world. Jews, Muslims, Christians. And within our own faith there is a huge variety of traditions. From Orthodox Russians, Greeks, Egyptians and Ethiopians to Catholics, Anglicans, Charismatics and Evangelicals. This intensity faithfulness can become a bit too much sometimes. In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre there are frequent fallings out so that the key to the church is held not by a Christian but by a Muslim family. Jerusalem has a psychiatric ward dedicated to people who are overcome by the intensity of their religious experience. And in this sometimes rather febrile atmosphere it's not hard to imagine the events of Pentecost that we celebrate today. That sense of people from many different backgrounds coming together and receiving God's spirit in a new and dramatic way. This was a sort of holy madness and some wondered if those who experienced it were drunk.

The Holy Spirit was not an entirely new concept to those who were gathered that day. All through the Hebrew scriptures we read of individuals on whom God's spirit rested. And throughout Jesus' life we read of times when the Holy Spirit was particularly present. We think of events like the annunciation and Jesus' baptism. But here on the day of Pentecost, the prophecy of Joel is fulfilled and God's spirit is poured out on all people. The spirit is democratised and all of us can share in its blessings.

And we all need the Spirit. We could all do with a bit of Holy madness. A sense of joy and empowerment. A sense of renewal to be the church whose birthday we celebrate today. In a few weeks' time we are going to have our vision day when we will think about the future direction of St John's. But in order to prepare for that we need to be listening to God now. Seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Seeing visions and dreaming dreams. Opening ourselves afresh to what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Perhaps more importantly, our world needs the Holy Spirit very much at the moment. That story of the tower of Babel that we heard from the Book of Genesis really strikes a chord. Our country is very divided at the moment. In all sorts of ways. We don't seem to be speaking the same language. In spite of all the different ways that we can communicate we don't seem to be speaking to each other effectively. We live in virtual bubbles of people who agree with us. We need the Spirit to break down some of those barriers and to allow us to communicate with people who have different opinions. Different lives and experiences.

And not only here but around the world. This week as we have marked the seventy fifth anniversary of the D-Day invasions we have been reminded of the importance of collaboration and understanding between nations. We were reminded again of what can be achieved when countries work together but also of the potential cost when they do not. With challenges like global warming we need God's spirit to blow through our world. Breaking down barriers once again and increasing understanding and as Christians we can all do our bit to help make that happen. We will not doubt be thinking more about the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit in the coming weeks but one which I think has been a bit overlooked recently is kindness. We need a bit more kindness in the world at the moment and all us can work on being kind to the people we encounter.

Going to the Holy Land is a remarkable experience and I hope that some of you may be able to come. I have been twice and can thoroughly recommend it. Strangely, though, one of the things that I brought back from going was that I didn't need to go to Israel and Palestine to be a fulfilled Christian.

Years ago I used to have three medieval churches in north Warwickshire and one of them had some amazing wall paintings. And one of those paintings was of Jerusalem. But it wasn't a Jerusalem that anyone who has been there would recognise. It looked like a medieval English town. All of the buildings were half timbered black and white buildings that would not have looked out of place in Kent or the Cotswolds. And it reminded me that while Jesus lived and died in the Holy land, the really important thing is that he became incarnate. One of us. A human being. And at Pentecost God's Spirit was poured out on all flesh. God can be experienced at all times and in all places. He is present everywhere. Through the Holy Spirit each one of us can have that direct encounter with him wherever we are. And that is really something to celebrate on this the birthday of the Church. Amen.