

Pentecost, Matins

Joel 2: 21-end and Acts 2: 14-21

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'Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.' (Acts 2:18)

I have the privilege of being the General Secretary of USPG¹ – the United Society Partners in the Gospel. An Anglican global mission agency, USPG was involved in the foundation of many of the churches within the Anglican Communion around the world. Today we work in deep and mutual partnership with churches across the world seeking to accompany them as they respond to the heartfelt needs of peoples in their everyday lives through around 50 mission programmes that seek to assist the churches in championing justice by tackling anti-human trafficking in north India or gender violence in Zambia or the climate crisis across Africa or energising the Church through working with the youth or through health programmes – and in the last year working closely with the Diocese in Europe in the Church of England's response to the war in Ukraine.

It is an immense privilege to be with you today on this the Feast of Pentecost, of the coming of the Spirit, at the birth of the Church. Let me begin by sharing a word, image an idea from the Philippines - *bayanihan*. A traditional village word it references the practice of relocating of a house – literally – specifically the spirit in which a community will help a family relocate by picking up their substantial bamboo house and carrying it. It is a considerable undertaking and takes on average 20 people to move. *Bayanihan* conveys a powerful image of communal solidarity – as someone's home, the place of their heart, all that they have - is gathered up by the community, straining every sinew, struggling not to stumble over rough terrain and transported to a place of safety away from flood or typhoon. Deeply practical, the Spirit of *Bayanihan*, firmly embedded in Filipino culture, captures a gift of time and effort with no expectation of getting anything in return.

Today we have the gift of THE Spirit: This extraordinary spectacle in Jerusalem where representatives from across the known world, 'from every nation under heaven' are gathered, like an ancient United Nations, and where they hear of God's deeds of power in their own tongues. It is a moment of fundamental disruption in the social fabric in which human distinctions and hierarchies are dissolved – age and gender – even slaves – described by the Romans as *anthropodum* ('man-footed') to distinguish them *tetrapodum* ('four-footed') beasts – or as *instrumentum vocale*, that is 'a tool with a voice'. *Even such* individuals will prophesy; speak the 'very words of God'.

Make no mistake, Pentecost articulates a profound, revolutionary vision for humanity. So radical that is it also deeply confusing, drunken: A moment of what anthropologists call 'collective effervescence' – of profound emotion, connection, euphoria, an experience of the ec-static, of the numinous.

¹ <https://www.uspg.org.uk>

One might, be inclined to ask - every now and then - what on earth has such dissolution, such chaos, got to do with the Church today? And yet this is our defining moment as a people – here we see the joy of new birth; these are the breaking waters issuing forth new life. And just as that first cry of the newborn infant is universally understood – so too, for those gathered – there is clear understanding that a radical community is being created. Those present hear the words of God – not because they suddenly grasp the privileged languages of Hebrew or Greek or Latin, but rather because the Spirit speaks in their own tongue, their own language with all its distinctiveness and colour, its poetry and rhythm and cadence and timbre, its idiom and metaphor and all the associations that come with it. The Spirit speaks not just to women and men, young and old, slave and free – but into the diverse cultures of all nations. ‘In our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power’.

The Church has not, of course, been faithful to this radical vision; indeed wrestling with this complex history is part of my day job: Over the centuries, as a mission agency, we went ‘to the ends of the earth’ – and in so doing we were, of course, implicated, entangled, caught up in the worldly agendas and power of the British Empire.

Whilst today, we work to deepen local and regional theologies and languages, in the past, like others, we contributed to ideas that the Gospel would only be ‘heard’ as part of a process of civilization. Rather than each hearing in their own tongue – it was the English language – and being ‘clothed in Christ’ was understood to involve taking on the dress, manners and mindset of the British.

I have little time for the fabricated culture wars of our times – but, as a culture, as British persons, we really do need to embrace the journey of self-understanding as a people and engage with our history (most of our sisters and brothers, in cultures subjected to British colonial imperialism know it well); and to appreciate that within the Church there are the grand-children of those who suffered the reprisals at the end of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya – more properly - the Land and Freedom movement; there are the descendants of those enslaved in the Caribbean; the Palestinian Christian inheritors of the Balfour Agreement, and the list goes on.

Aside from simple, basic, human empathy, such a deepening understanding will set us free as individuals and as a Church to respond to the life-giving call of the Spirit in our day; help us to witness faithfully to the radical vision of the Church at Pentecost: that is a profoundly inter-cultural reality in which we are all open to encounter with others (repeat). We will not understand our identity as baptised persons, as those who yearn to see the Kingdom of God, as pilgrims on a journey to the heavenly city – if we do not see ourselves in profound solidarity, as one, with all our sisters and brothers. This is an essential dimension of that beloved community, at whose heart lies a commitment to a foundational equality before the Cross of Christ, of a vision that challenges ideas of entrenched power and privilege, inherited presumptions of hierarchy or national pride and speaks into a radically different vision of a just social order, a compassionate global community.

It is contemporary artists and curators that are at the forefront of this spiritual and ethical engagement, who are pressing ‘unmute’ on the marginal voices of the past and of the present. And we are blessed by such creativity in London continually – with shows, like the Royal Academy’s

powerful *Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers*² – an exhibition of Black artists from the American South or Isaac Lucien’s powerfully evocative films current at the Tate Britain in his exhibition – *What freedom is to me*³.

Souls grown deep; the nature of freedom; as a culture we are on a journey of understanding our past in a refreshed way – that journey will have moments of rough and challenging terrain. For example, the call for reparations for the Caribbean societies will only continue to grow (and in my view rightly so). The vision of a more just way of relating to others lies at the heart of today, of Pentecost and it has its outer dimension – the striving for justice, equity, freedom, but there is also a profound inner journey, which involves personal change and transformation, which stirs the spirit of the depths and may literally - inhabit our dreams. Like the Filipino family, the church, we may need to go on a journey, as communities and individuals - to be carried with joy and sweat to higher ground.

In which case are we open to the voices of all, past and present; to the wisdom, solidarity and fellowship of others in such a journey of the Spirit?

Amen

² <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/souls-grown-deep>

³ <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/isaac-julien>