

We have read this morning, the Feast of Pentecost, that well known passage in the Acts of the Apostles telling of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples of Jesus on that first Pentecost. It falls on one of the great Festivals of the Jewish calendar, ‘Shavuot’, the Feast of Weeks, on which Jews remember the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. And so Jerusalem at that time would have been full of pilgrims from all over the Eastern Mediterranean. This is a fast-moving passage, with its images of wind, of tongues of fire, of disciples speaking in languages that could be understood by ‘Parthians, Elamites, dwellers in Mesopotamia’, pilgrims of different nationalities, speaking different languages.

It is a passage that contrasts with the story in Genesis of the building of the Tower of Babel, of people who initially spoke the same language, suddenly not able to understand each other’s languages, a story of people being driven apart.

Babel, Pentecost: one representing a closing down of communication, the other an opening up of communication.

Closing, opening.

That if you like has been the story of our society over these last 15 months, as the spread of corona virus, has forced a series of lockdowns on us, as we have been driven into isolation from each other, families, friends not able to visit each other, places of meeting, our pubs and restaurants, sports facilities all forced to close. And of course our churches not able to open for worship.

Now, with the arrival of the vaccines and with it the vaccination of a large proportion of the population, we look forward to a more sustained opening up of our society.

Babel, Pentecost.

Closing down, opening up.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the coming of the Spirit, the community that had gathered around Jesus began to draw more and more people, initially in Jerusalem and then further afield. This community, or Church as it was beginning to be called, was faced with a fundamental decision as to its identity. Did it see itself simply as a group within Judaism or do they embrace in full membership those outside Judaism?

They were faced with a choice: do they remain as they are or do they follow the prompting of the Spirit to move out beyond the safe and familiar to embrace the opportunities in the world beyond.

Which brings me back to where we were last Sunday, our first Sunday back in Church after a prolonged lockdown. As I remarked last week, there is a general recognition at all levels in the Church that church life after covid is not going to be the same; that simply reverting to the way things were is simply not an option.

Over these last few months, as we have learned the intricacies of the various social media platforms, we have found ourselves engaging with a large number

of people outside our usual congregation. There are currently 400 people following our Facebook page; on most weeks in excess of 60 people have viewed our YouTube clips. Prior to the reopening of Church, each week over 50 have watched our livestream. Not all of those on Facebook and YouTube are from this area; but there are a number of people who are from this area who have made no previous contact with this Parish.

The challenge, now that we have opened up again, is to resist the temptation to think that we can just go back to the way we were. Rather, in addition to our regular in-church services, which will themselves have to evolve in response to changing circumstances; how do we retain some of the lessons that we have learned; how do we continue to engage with those who have engaged with us online.

So that, to paraphrase the words of the crowd on that first Pentecost, ‘all may hear in their own tongues the wonderful works of God.’

Babel, Pentecost.

Closing down, opening up.

How we respond to that challenge will have a bearing on the future witness of the Church, on the future life of this Parish.