**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Pentecost Sunday is the birthday of the church. And all happy birthday celebrations revolve around the ‘person’ whose birthday it is. So today, we focus on the body that is the Church.

When I was younger, this Sunday was more popularly known as ‘Whitsunday’. The tradition of some churches in past times was to baptize adult converts on Pentecost Sunday. The baptism candidates would wear white robes on that day, so Pentecost was called "Whitsunday" or "White Sunday" after these white baptismal clothes.

As we read through the second chapter of Acts, which was the New Testament reading today, we notice those features in the story that are related to the Holy Spirit. You cannot separate the work of the Holy Spirit from the work and nature of the church.

Yes, but Jane, what is the Holy Spirit? How do I know when the Holy Spirit is there/here? How do we feel/apprehend the Holy Spirit? What are the signs of being filled with the Holy Spirit, but also what are the ways of enabling us to be filled by the Holy Spirit?

If you were to ask that in a sort of intellectual way, I might answer something about there being a renewed emphasis on the Word of scripture; a renewed emphasis on prayer; something about confession and repentance that enables us to shift stuff around inside us, so that blockages - things that prevent us feeling close to God - get unblocked and make space for the Holy Spirit.

But for me – and I think for those people in that scene described in the Acts of the Apostles passage that we heard this morning – communication is the absolute key.

I have had the privilege of being among some of our young children and families in the past week or so. And I was mulling over the fact that, when we get together on Sundays, it is on the whole a very adult-orientated occasion. We speak to the adults, the parents, and we occupy the children, so that we don’t, on the whole, speak to them. (I know I’m generalising and exaggerating here, but bear with me).

And I was made aware that there are children both in our midst and in our wider community, who are bi-lingual. What a gift that is! To be able to speak and to understand in an entirely natural way what one parent is saying, and then to switch in a split-second to hear and to speak with the other parent in another language. And as a supposed linguist myself, to hear children with way more facility with languages than I will ever have is deeply frustrating but also a cause of great joy. Because communication is so so so important.

Every time I conduct one of what we call the Occasional Offices – a wedding or a funeral or a baptism – maybe especially the baptisms because they are so much a part of our Sunday morning regular worship, I am brought to a realisation. And that realisation is that, when we perform these offices, we assume – even require – that all the people speak our language.

So, key question then: how do we, the Church, enable others to hear us speaking in their own language? The cultural language we use and the social language we use are often very far removed from the language of the Church. I did it myself just now when I talked about Occasional Offices. What is an Office, for goodness’ sake? Well it’s just a service. So an occasional office is a service on a particular (special) occasion. And we are often incomprehensible to normal people because that which we use to communicate among ourselves is completely alien to others.

And what the Church has done over time, is train people to speak its language rather than learn to speak theirs. People come to me a bit puzzled because the word I habitually use is baptism, yet the word that comes most naturally to them is christening. What is the difference? Well there isn’t one. So perhaps **I** need to learn to use ‘christening’ more often then.

We, as a Church, need to stop assuming that everyone is going to learn our language. We need to operate, to live multi-lingually. If the little children among us can do it, then so can the rest of us.

And that means that we, the Church, need to change. The prevailing monoculture of the Church needs to change quite fundamentally. We are denying the movement of the Holy Spirit if we are not moving and changing ourselves.

And I’ve only touched on language. But what about the whole nature of worship? Yes we can argue that because God is ‘other’, then we need particular special acts (and words) to convey that sense of wonder at the majesty of God. Yes I get that. I get it because I speak that language of words and ritual, and that language works for me. I elevate the elements of the Holy Communion during the Eucharistic prayer because I am in awe that God has, in this process, changed them from being simple wafers and wine into the body and blood of Jesus. But none of that is obvious to someone who has walked through the door for the first time.

I would never argue that we need to divest ourselves of all the bits we each hold dear – all the words and acts that, for us, make our worship worship. But at the same time, there is a clear argument for broadening what we think of as worship to include those who speak another language and don’t understand our ‘mother tongue’ as it were. Ideas on a postcard, please……

The Spirit of God brought unity at Pentecost. Unity among the hugely diverse peoples gathered there from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds.

In order to bring about true unity and real peace, what currently appears to be unity and peace must be subverted. In a world of injustice and inequality, the status quo in most cases offers peace to the privileged only, and what is considered to be peace is ultimately rather peripheral and superficial.

 The Spirit of God brought inclusivity. The Spirit of God has no regard for privilege. The Holy Spirit’s work is not restricted to those who are designated – by whom? - holy ones; rather the Spirit is poured out ‘upon all flesh’. It includes daughters as well as sons, young as well as old, and male and female slaves. The marginalized and the oppressed are equal partners with the privileged.

On this day of Pentecost we need to ask ourselves, which Spirit is at work in us, the Church? If it is the Spirit of God, then we are, by definition, humble, non-judgemental, open and inclusive, both as individuals and as communities.

 If we were to ask for just one birthday gift on this Pentecost, I’d be voting for the gift of speaking in other people’s languages: the language of the youth, the language of the non-religious, the language of the social activist, the language of our children, the language of the old, the weak and the sick. We are called by the Spirit to speak the language of all the people.

So this feast of Pentecost invites us to revive our appreciation for the Church as a united, inclusive and witnessing community. It challenges us to grow in our desire to listen to the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is no stranger to us. The Spirit is God living in us, among us and around us. And that is worth having a jolly good birthday party for.

**Amen**