

Pentecost 2023: Unity and Diversity in the Spirit

Date: Pentecost, 28 May 2023

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Ezekiel 36:22-28; Psalm 103:12-22; 1 Corinthians 12:1-13

Prayer:

Come Holy Spirit. As you spoke to our ancestors, as you speak to our brothers and sister in every language and nation throughout the world, so now come and speak to us. We do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. Speak God's word to us today. Fire of God, melt our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh. Move us to follow your laws and keep your commands that we may live and we may know your presence.

One of the greatest fears that we have in life is that we might be ignored. It's every preacher's greatest fear. (That was a joke). But it's true isn't it? We want to be heard. We want to be known. We want to be loved. And it hurts deeply when we're overlooked or forgotten. We want to be recognised, and not just in general but for me, the unique individual who I am. One of the books I used to read to my kids was about a fish called Percy Plaice. Percy wishes he was fast or colourful or funny like his other fishy friends, and despairs that he isn't special, he's boring, a nobody. But then he rescues his friends from a shark by hiding them under his camouflaged body and so wins the top prize at the talent show. Like so many kids books these days, it's an affirmation that each of us is unique and special.

Except we also have another fear, just as real and just as deep - that we might stick out like a sore thumb. We're afraid that being different might put us on the outside, leave us isolated. We want to be treated the same as everyone else.

These two fears or find all sorts of expression in our individual lives and in society - the desire for recognition and the desire for belonging. How can I be recognised for who I am and yet at the same time fit in? How can you have equality and difference, unity and diversity at the same time? It's a question we all have, whether you're a Christian or not. This morning we're going to look at how this question is answered in 1 Corinthians 12. Today is Pentecost, where we celebrate the day that Jesus poured out the promised gift of the Father, the Holy Spirit. He gives his Holy Spirit, the very presence and power of God to all who believe in his name. There is so much we could say about Holy Spirit, but this morning we will see that it is the Holy Spirit who overcomes this paradox of unity and diversity.

So, have a look with me verse 2-3.

2 You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. 3 Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

Here, the key thing to note is that the Holy Spirit is the one by whom we enter into the Christian life. To say that Jesus Christ is Lord is the most basic confession of the Christian faith. This is to say that not only is Jesus Lord of the universe, but he is also your own Lord, the master whom you serve. This is what it is to be a Christian.

But this is not a given. The apostle Paul points to the fact that alternate paths lie before us. Like our first parents we may be deceived and led astray by idols. Idols are things that we worship and serve, things that we fear, things from which we derive our ultimate meaning and significance. They are substitutes for true and living God. For the ancients and in some cultures today, they may have been literal statues. But these are a representation of something deeper. Aphrodite - sex and beauty. Ares and Zeus - power. Athena - wisdom. Mammon - money. Hestia - home, family, domestic order. Our idols may be those good desires for recognition and belonging, but blown out of proportion so that they loom so large that we fail to see other goods we are sacrificing in order to get them, even our own integrity.

One example of this is what C.S. Lewis describes as “The Inner Ring”. It’s the longing we all have to socialise with circles of people from which we are currently excluded. To have that sense of significance or control from being on the inside, where the real action is. In his novel, *That Hideous Strength*, the young Mark Studdock has begun to work at ‘Bracton College’, and he longs for acceptance into its various inner circles. He climbs the College hierarchy, moving further in from one circle of power to another. Eventually he becomes involved in a plot by the National Institute for Controlled Experiments to deliver Britain over to eugenics, involuntary sterilisation, ethnic cleansing and fascism. But it wasn’t these programs themselves that eroded Studdock’s integrity, it was his own inner compulsion to be on the inside that led him to compromise after compromise. These rings are often informal. They can control us by promising inclusion and threatening exclusion. And before long a cycle has us trapped: envy at others belonging, a yearning to belong, exultation when we’re accepted, then boredom, then envy at the *next* ring. And all the while the cycle can destroy us because each promise contains the subtle invitation to compromise how we treat others. For to be on the inside means you have to keep others out.

Some years ago I read an article by David Brooks about what he calls “the shame culture” engendered by social media. The world of Instagram and TicTock is a world of constant display and observation. The desire to be embraced and praised by the community is intense. This creates a set of behaviour patterns. Members of the group lavish praise on one another so that they themselves might be accepted and praised in return. But there are also those who build their personal power and reputation by policing those who break the group code. It’s a moral system based on inclusion and exclusion in which everyone is perpetually insecure. Brooks writes, “There are no permanent standards, just the shifting judgement of the crowd. It’s a culture of oversensitivity, overreaction and frequent moral panics, during which everybody feels compelled to go along.”¹

It’s this sort of thing, where the human desire for belonging has become a cancerous idolatry that the Spirit calls us out of when he calls us to Christ. If this is the sort of thing that chasing idols does to us, it’s no wonder that the prophet Ezekiel links idolatry with impurity and looks for the day when the Spirit of God will cleanse people from this kind of self destructive behaviour. This is the radical transformation that the Spirit brings.

¹ David Brooks, ‘The Shame Culture’, *New York Times*, 15.2.2016

Changing our hearts of stone and making hearts of flesh. Moving us to love God and follow his ways, and keep his law.

We began by seeing that the work of the Spirit is to bring us to give our allegiance to Christ. But He also unites us to Christ, making us members of his body. That's what we see in verse 12-13. That's what baptism points to. And it's through this union that we are given the life-giving water of the Spirit, God himself pouring out his life and love into our hearts. It's in this work of Spirit uniting us to Christ and his body the church that we find both our desire to belong and also our desire for recognition are met. That desire to be in the inner ring isn't of itself bad, because we're all social animals. We're made for community. The problem is when the desire to belong leads us to compromise in order to fit in. But here we see the ultimate community that we were made for - fellowship with God. It's the Spirit who unites us to Christ. And the Son brings us to his Father so that he becomes our Father. There is no more inner ring than to be brought into communion with God himself. That is what we have in Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

And through the Spirit we become members of Christ's body. We're brought into fellowship with a community whose members reach right around the globe, through time and space, a community whose fellowship is not ultimately broken by death because it is in the one who has conquered death. And it doesn't matter who you are - Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, black or white, young or old, Tasmanian, mainlander, Cantonese, Mandarin, Japanese, Aboriginal, English, whatever - all are welcome. You are welcome.

If you confess Christ as Lord - you belong. And the inner circle you belong to is nothing less than the life of the Triune God - because his gift is himself - the life of his Son on the cross, the life of his Spirit in you. If you don't yet know Christ, this is the extraordinary welcome God offers you in Jesus.

But this belonging does not mean we have arrived. Nor is it a licence for narcissism. The welcome is also a summons to serve. The same Spirit who draws us in is also the one who gives us gifts for the common good (v7). And so it is that we find our desire for recognition is also met. The unity the Spirit brings is not a uniformity. It's not unity at the expense of your individuality - no it is a unity in diversity. Each member of the body is needed. The Spirit gives to each person in a way that they cannot be replicated. And this counsels us against both despair and pride. Do not despair - you are gifted by the Spirit, even if you don't yet know how. Who you are, your history, your personality, the things you're good at, the things you're not so good at, the stage of life you're at, with all its possibilities and limitations, all these are God's gift that he can use as you offer them in service to him in his church and his world. Do not boast - your gifts are from God, the work of the Spirit in you, at his pleasure. There is nothing you do not have that you have not been given. The question is, will you serve God with what he has given you?

It is one of the singular joys of being a minister is getting to see people do just that. Whether it's people like Arthur and Jeanne who throw themselves into serving wherever is needed, or Amy deploying her incredible organisational mind, or Mike bringing his years of experience in governance, or Ken cultivating a little Eden in our grounds, or Anthea using her gift at organisational leadership to lead the Med School, or Yukiko and

Jenny and Marilyn doing flowers. It's beautiful. And what's more, even if people don't always see your service, God does and it brings him joy.

Sometimes people wonder what their gift is. It's more helpful to ask these three things - what is the need, what's my availability, and what can I do? Bring those together, and that's where you can serve. Because in the end it's not about your gift, but rather that you're serving the common good. Sometimes we can worry about our weaknesses or that we'll be a failure, and so we don't give things a try. Let me encourage you, we all learn through mistakes. God's strength is most clearly seen in our weakness. His grace is sufficient for you because his power is made perfect in our weakness. Sometimes you just need to get out of your own head and all that negative self talk by just having a go and getting your hands dirty.

I've spoken about unity in diversity when it comes to the various gifts that the Holy Spirit gives each one of us for the common good. But that unity in diversity is also the case when it comes to language and culture. The Church is made up of people from every tribe and language and nation and culture. The Holy Spirit unites us together in that diversity, even as we saw on the day of Pentecost where the disciples spoke in all those different languages. Every culture and language is valued and has a place in the body of Christ. The Spirit's work is to perfect our humanity, to make us like Christ, but that doesn't mean uniformity. It just means he will purify where our cultures have been corrupted by sin, so that what reflects Christ sings. He does that work of purification as we sit together in our diversity under his word, the Bible. He calls us to listen to the voices of our sisters and brothers, to judge ourselves and them by his word, recognising that they may show us things that we have not seen in the Scriptures, and so that exchange is a moment for growth and greater holiness. And so as we are welcomed into the bosom of the Father, so we are given each other, all the diversity of humanity, made in the image of God, by the Holy Spirit. This is the promise and possibility of the Church, the communion of saints, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

I don't know whether your experience of church has been one where you've felt known and loved, where you're acknowledged and where you belong. Chances are it's been mixed. And that's because the church is made up of real people who are works in progress - like you and me. But these are the people who the Spirit calls. These are the people who the Spirit gifts. These are the people in whom God is at work in the mundane messiness of life.

So it is my prayer that the Holy Spirit may move each one of us to confess Christ as Lord; that he might make real for us the welcome of the Father given us in the Son; and that he free us to serve in the unique ways he has given us to.