

Homily, St. Andrew's
Pentecost Sunday, May 24, 2015
Acts 2:1-21

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

On this Pentecost Day we celebrate the arrival of the Holy Spirit as the final major event in our liturgical year. Through this first half of the liturgical year we followed the story of Jesus, beginning with our Advent preparations for God's birth anew in our lives and our world... all the way through our 50-day celebration of Jesus' resurrection from the dead that ended last night. With Jesus' Ascension to heaven 10 days ago, we have been waiting in these last days for God's promise of the Holy Spirit to be fulfilled. Our celebration of Jesus' Ascension last Sunday marked the end of Jesus' mission and ministry on earth, and today marks a new beginning. Today we celebrate a new birth - the birth of the church. Today, the mantle of responsibility for God's mission and ministry on earth shifts to us as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Today we hear the story of the first Pentecost. It is a fantastic story of wind and fire disrupting a gathering of disciples, filling them with the Holy Spirit and giving them the new and unexpected gift of the ability to speak in other languages. With this gift came a whirlwind that changed everything. The chaos and commotion of the fire and wind caused a crowd to gather. Bewilderment was the order of the day as those who added to the gathering could suddenly understand the speech of the disciples, even though they came from different places. Questions abounded with the disciples undoubtedly as confused as the crowds suddenly surrounding them. The actions described in the scene tell the story: bewildered, amazed, astonished, perplexed. Finally Peter stands with his closest friends and addresses the crowd and so begins the story of the church growing and spreading across the ancient world.

A couple of weeks ago, in the second study session in the Animate: Faith series, Lillian Daniel addressed the contemporary interest in spirituality disconnected from religion and argued for the importance and place of community and connection to something greater than one's own self that religion offers. After telling some of her story of moving away from religion and then her re-entry into it, she concluded that how the life of faith works for her is about being "grounded in tradition; centred in worship; called to serve; and free to dream." This 4-part experience of religion was depicted like a plant with roots, stem, leaves and finally a flower... and so the order of things matters. A plant cannot grow without roots and a flower cannot be supported without a stem... leaves are necessary for photosynthesis to take place. In other words, every part is needed for the plant to thrive. Likewise, for us to thrive as spiritual people in religious community, we too need each part in its turn: "grounded in tradition; centred in worship; called to serve; and free to dream."

Beginning last fall, during last year's season of growth in the Spirit, we took time to ground ourselves in our Anglican tradition. We journeyed through some of the key moments and movements that have shaped our church and we celebrated various people, our ancestors of the faith, who have greatly influenced our Anglican way. I know that for at least some it seemed like an odd way to begin to move into the future. For many over the past 50+ years, "tradition" has

had a negative connotation because of the deeply ingrained modern value of progress that says the past should be left behind. For others, however, “tradition” was to be clung to with great determination for fear that something important will be lost with progress. Particularly in the church, “tradition” became a kind of dividing line. This line can partially be understood generationally, falling between the silent generation of those now over about 70 years old, and the Baby Boomers who are roughly 55-70 years old now. But generations younger than the Boomers have a different relationship to tradition than either of the elder generations. The word itself has come to have a much more positive connotation for people who desire that connection to something greater, something deeper, something more... without it being a straight-jacket. Grounding ourselves in tradition is not about returning to the past or trying to re-create an imagined Golden Age. Grounding ourselves in tradition is, rather, about deepening our identity in relationship to a community of faith that extends beyond ourselves and that has roots deeper than the latest fads. It is only with this grounding in tradition that something beautiful, and something that lasts, can grow.

But being grounded in tradition is not the end place... the roots are not the whole plant... grounding and rootedness is only the beginning of growth. The next part, the second step, is being “centred in worship.” It is like the stem of the plant... it can’t grow without the roots and it needs to be strong enough to support the leaves and the flowers. If you haven’t already noticed, this spring and into the immediate future, we have begun to focus on growing in our centredness in worship with events like the Parish breakfast and the upcoming “Art of Worship” workshop. I have now registered for the Sorrento Centre course this summer called “Old Wine, New Skins: Beyond the Book of Alternative Services” to learn more about the work the national church’s Liturgy Task Force. According to Sorrento’s brochure, “this course is open to all, whether lay or clergy, who have a love for the disciplined freedom of worship in the Anglican tradition.” Do you hear how many of our key words are there?!? Freedom and tradition are in the same sentence! Remember that freedom is the last of Daniel’s steps... the flower of “free to dream”... that is where we want to get to, but without being uprooted.

My hope for this Pentecostal season of growth in the Spirit which we enter today is that together we will deepen our understanding and practice of worship as a way of moving towards the future with confidence. It is the first of two intermediary steps between being grounded in our tradition and being free to dream about an unknown future. The second intermediary step of being “called to serve” is one we will focus on at a later date. For now, we are going to delve into our worship practice to re-discover how our worship is connected to our professed theology, to our lived theology, to our spirituality, to our experience of the world and to our desire for transformation in our life in Christ and in the world. For instance, the change to standing for the entirety of the Eucharistic prayer is intended to communicate the unity of the prayer along with its spirit of thanksgiving more than a spirit of penitence. The Greek word “eucharist” means “thanksgiving,” coming from etiological roots meaning grateful or ‘to offer graciously’. A standing posture communicates this much better than kneeling and the shift from a more closed, personal, internal posture of submission to a more open, externally focussed posture of celebration and gratitude matters a great deal to our experience of the ritual, to our practice of faith and to how all that is communicated to everyone who participates.

I know that even just talking about worship, or implying the possibility of change in our worship practice can cause anxiety. I know that how we worship is something we hold dear... it is something close to our hearts that impacts our lives in ways we rarely understand with our heads. I know that wars have been fought over even the smallest of liturgical changes and that we would rather avoid any conflict. But to stagnate because of fear of conflict will not help us move into the future. To grow is, by its very nature, to change... and growth need not be feared. It need not cause vicious conflict of personal attack. On the other hand, conflict that involves intense, passionate discussion about what we hold dear, why it matters so much and how we might find the language - both verbal and ritualistic language - to communicate those deeper experiences to new generations... well that's conflict that is well worth the risk and the effort. That kind of passionate conversation is the ground - the ground of tradition - from which growth occurs.

Our Pentecost story today tells us that the first sign of the Holy Spirit was the astonishing ability to speak in different, previously unknown languages, so that those in the gathering crowd could understand the disciples' message of God's grace and power and love. If we want to be able to teach new people the language of prayer and worship that means so much to us, we must first learn to communicate anew, perhaps with a different, previously unknown language. That's why it's so important for us to re-visit familiar beliefs, stories and practices, looking through the lens of today's world. Just imagine the confusion, amazement, perplexity so many in the world could experience if all of sudden we speak in a language they understand!

Becoming more centred in worship remains a penultimate focus because we know that while communal worship is central to our practice of faith, it is not ultimately the point. Out of the strength and comfort and spirit that we develop in worship, we are called to serve those beyond the walls of our church and we become increasingly free to dream about the kingdom of God Jesus told us about. If that first Pentecost was about the birth of something that grew and spread across the ancient world, just imagine what it could be mean for us to be re-born today, in the same Holy Spirit, to be a part of God's grace and power and love growing and spreading across our community.