

## **Manningham Uniting Church**

**Together@10**

**19<sup>th</sup> May 2024: Pentecost**

**Theme: The flames have died down**

**Text: Acts 2:1-11**

Pentecost is the birthday of the Church. On this birthday of the church, we would do well to remember the stories our ancestors wove together about what it was like back in the beginning. We are told they were huddled together in fear. Afraid to go outside, in case the authorities might spot them. Tormented by their grief. Afraid the dream might be over. Some of them were even considering giving up and giving in.

The Romans were just too big, too entrenched, too powerful, they didn't stand a chance against the powers that be. Just look what they did to Jesus. Jesus had dared to speak out. Jesus had dared to challenge it all, the Empire, the religious institution and the culture itself, all in the name of love. Jesus had tried to set them free from the oppression of the Empire, from the power of the religious authorities, free from their prejudices, free from the lure of their own self-centeredness. Jesus had tried to let them see that there was so much more to life than survival. Jesus had taught them so much, helped them to question so much. And look where it got him.

The powers that be had done their very worst and now Jesus was dead. Sure, some insisted that Jesus wasn't gone, that they felt his presence, that there was no need to give up or give in, that they could still change the world. But, what to do? How do they go on?

And then it was as if they were on fire! Suddenly they were alive with all that Jesus had taught them. We should have been there as the flames of justice flashed about igniting them with passion, with courage, with love. Oh, they had fire in our bellies!

Yes, it was chaos back then with everyone from all over the place talking all at once, putting their two cents worth into the mix. But stuff got done. They changed the world because the very Spirit of God that lived and breathed in Jesus, was living and breathing in them. They were on fire; so much so that people came from far and wide just to try and figure out what had given them the courage to be who they were created to be.

Those were the days. It isn't like it is now. Unfortunately, the church has settled into the culture, and the flames have died down and once again we are huddling together behind closed doors. Afraid, we try to protect our territory, our patch, our corner, our tribes. Afraid. We resort to tribalism.

A story from the Hebrew Scriptures that is often told at Pentecost. Recorded in the Book of Genesis, the story of the Tower of Babel would have been a familiar one to the people of Luke's community. The story of the chaos that ensues because of humanity's hubris contains truths about tribalism that would have been as familiar to a first-century audience as they are to a 21<sup>st</sup>-century audience. The perils of tribalism which pits one people against another and one culture against another were ingrained in the religious traditions of the first century.

The writer of Acts uses the story of Pentecost to point to the truth of the Jesus experience. Their experience of Jesus with his radical ideas about a loving God, led the early followers of the way to a new understanding of faith. Empowered by Jesus' full embodiment of love, the early followers felt compelled to share their experience. Faith did not have to be lived out in fear, even in the face of death. Being faithful was not about being exclusive or tribal, for love knows no boundaries. It wasn't even about religion which is so often used by the powerful to oppress the powerless. Faith was not about purity but compassion, healing and justice. Faith didn't need to be destructive if it heightened our awareness that the creation of which we are a part is an interconnected web.

Sadly, over the years all too many Christians have seen the story of Pentecost as simply a reversal of the Tower of Babel story. But here we have so much more. In the Tower of Babel, we have a story that speaks to the origins of a kind of chaos that is the result of human arrogance. This chaos leads to disaster. The response of the people is to adopt a kind of tribalism where eventually only one tribe becomes the chosen people. The chosen tribe then chooses to exhibit a kind of uniformity that defines who is in and who is out. Boundaries are established. The religious practice that emerges strives for order and uniformity. Order is established and the faithful are encouraged to live within the rules.

But in the Pentecost story, the chaos and disorder are not created by humans but by God. The Pentecost story is about chaos and disorder; about God who is running amok. Boundaries are crossed. Taboos are broken.

Suddenly, like the rush of the wind young people have visions and elders have dreams; dreams and visions that threaten the established order.

Luke's story speaks directly to his community which has become accustomed to a religion that is a product of its culture; where faith reflects the values of the tribe. Religion is used to give members of the community a sense of who was in and who was out. It played to their fear of others who were beyond the tribe. It grounded their xenophobia and ethnocentrism in righteousness. It served as the glue that told its adherents who they were and who they weren't. Religion gave people an illusion of living in an orderly and predictable world. Outside the boundaries of their religion was a place of chaos. Its inhabitants were judged to be demonic or subhuman.

In the early history of Israel those who worshipped gods outside the culture were labelled idolaters. Identifying idolaters gave the faithful of the local religion a target for their contempt and hostility and someone to blame for their disappointments and failures.

Along comes Jesus who challenges the status quo along with the powers that be who maintain order by force of might. Violence, greed, and force become the tools to the Pax Romana, which insisted that the way to peace was through force, domination, and execution on the cross. First, you conquer a people, then you wield your power over them to control them so that you can tax them and the status quo is the only kind of peace one can hope for. And along comes Jesus who points to another way to peace through justice.

People want to believe, they want to follow Jesus, but they are fearful of the chaos that might ensue. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know. Chaos is frightening.

Into that mix the writer of Luke offers his story of Pentecost which displays the Spirit of God at work amid chaos. The followers of Jesus are calling their communities out of the constraints of the religious practices of their day.

The Pentecost story reflects the early Christian understanding of Jesus as a leader who didn't just address the Chosen People but who engaged the Syrophenician woman, the Centurion, and the Samaritan leper. Luke, in the telling of the story of Pentecost, already knew that Christianity had spread to the edge of the known world and to its very centre in Rome. Christianity had already transcended tribe and tradition. Jesus inspired a religion of the poor and the powerless without an enemy or enmity and yet inclusive in its membership.

The story of Pentecost shows the Spirit of God out of the box, prancing about in the town square and intoxicating the people with the sheer beauty of her audacity.

Luke's Pentecost story served to remind those first Christians of Jesus' call to diversity. That call to diversity has the power to contradict the power of the status quo of tribalism that was exemplified in the story of the Tower of Babel.

The followers of the Way can declare that in Christ there is no East nor West, no North nor South, no Jew nor Gentile, no man nor woman.

Luke has crafted the story of Pentecost that declares that in Christ there is no longer Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the ports of Libya around Cyrene, nor even Romans. All are one as Christ is One.

In Jesus the followers of the way are challenged to think beyond tribalism, to dream dreams and see visions. Not to settle for the status quo. Not to be afraid of chaos. Not to be afraid of confusion. Not to be afraid of fire. Most of all not to domesticate the Spirit but allow the Spirit to ignite the flames of change.

Luke's Pentecost story calls us to a similar awakening. An awakening that begs the question: *What kind of Pentecost stories have we crafted in Manningham Uniting Church?*

On this Pentecost Sunday we are called to imagine a 21<sup>st</sup> century Pentecost where rather than speaking in languages that we've never understood before, we begin to listen to those who we've failed to understand before.

Imagine an audacious Spirit calling us beyond Christianity's exclusivism. Imagine a vision of Christianity whose first impulse is to listen rather than speak; a Christianity that is willing to share its truths in a spirit of cooperation without an emphasis on conversion. Imagine a vision of Pentecost where the wind and the fire represent God out of the box.

Do we have the courage to listen and learn from the truths of other tribes?  
Do we have the wisdom to embrace divinely inspired chaos?

Some dreams and visions have to be believed before they can be seen. The temptation is always to settle. The temptation is not to ask questions, to evaluate what we are doing year in and year out. The temptation is simply to settle, to keep the wheels turning.

Like Peter in the high mountain, "*Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*" (Matt. 17:4)

Peter wanted to settle.

We are not called to put out the flames of the Spirit. We are called to be tenderers of the flames. The flames of Pentecost are powerful. Those flames are dangerous. Those flames could turn the whole world on its head.

I'm telling you that if we were to live a life that reflected the subversive and radical message of love that gives voice to the voiceless and a place to those who are displaced, if we were really to stand up against systemic oppression perpetrated by those in power, then we would indeed find ourselves on the wrong side of the lawmakers.

Perhaps, the time has come to fan the flames with passion; the kind of passion that Jesus had – passion for life. Life that is bigger than ourselves. Life that is full and abundant not just for us but for our neighbours as well.

Perhaps the time has come to express our faith once again, not with the acceptance of a belief system, but with reckless acts of loving-kindness. Now that's the kind of fire that could change your lives, change the world.

Are you prepared to fan those flames? Or are you afraid of the powers that be? Would you rather stay locked away in here where it's safe? Or are your questions burning a hole in your carefully held beliefs?

Are you ready to follow Jesus out there into the world? Are you ready to fan the flames with your passion? I can hardly wait to see those flames dancing all about! It will be as if we are on fire!

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came. And on that day, Peter was inflamed, and all those with him received power.

Peter was never the same. The one who had denied Christ began to publicly preach Christ to any who would listen.

Amen.