

Speaking in tongues

Numbers 11:24-30, John 20:19-22, Acts 2:1-12

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“Reform (the URC’s monthly magazine) acknowledges the importance of inclusivity and diversity within the Church community. This means welcoming people from all backgrounds and walks of life, and creating an environment where everyone feels valued and respected....it is about creating a Church that is relevant and meaningful to people in the 21st century. It is about embracing new ideas and perspectives, while staying rooted in the traditions and teachings that have guided the URC for generations.”

This quotation comes from the May issue of *Reform* and it is part of Stephen Tomkins’ editorial. He explains that, what we’ve just heard was part of the article produced by the online artificial intelligence website, which was asked to write an editorial for *Reform*. Well, just by reading it or hearing it, I don’t think any of us would have guessed that this was, in fact the work of a robot. The words were not only correct and put together in a grammatically acceptable way, but they expressed rightly the guiding principles of the magazine with a good structure sounding just like a human person. But to those of us, who are regular readers of Tomkins’ editorials, something was missing; the personal nature of his communications; the way he shares his own life experiences, which shape his views; his gentle humour and self-deprecation and his unmistakable intention of wanting to teach and challenge his readers, while fully understanding their predicaments. Dare I say, the spirit of a flesh-and-blood reality behind the words, not merely a thinking automaton.

AI, or artificial intelligence, is the hotly debated subject of our days increasingly affecting more and more of our lives, including religion and church life. Tomkins also asked the AI website to write a hymn and a sermon and his conclusion was he’s heard worse in churches in real life! So now it will be for you to decide which way this sermon was produced!

Today, on the day of Pentecost we are thinking about that illusive, indefinable reality which we thought, was missing from the AI editorial, and which we call the spirit. And we are thinking about the role that spirit plays in communication. Our Scriptures are full of references to the Spirit and not just parts of the NT but also the

Jewish Scriptures, we call the OT. If we read them carefully, we may discover something of the changing, growing, deepening understanding of our ancestors in the faith as they grapple with this reality in their own lives. Our three Bible readings may serve as a kind of illustration of that.

According to Biblical tradition Moses was a great leader. He had many exceptional qualities, but delegating wasn’t one of them. More than once he needed a nudge to accept that the great work of liberating the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, conveying to them God’s guidance and forming them into a nation wasn’t a one-man show. We may know something about this too. Although not many of us aspire to be great leaders, we do know the temptation to feel that, certain jobs can only be done by us, for we know best how they should be done. But if we want to tune into God’s work in the world, we are called to see the wider horizons, the greater scope of that work which requires sharing the load with others for the sake of the communities we serve.

In our first reading Moses is asked ‘to give up’ some of the spirit that was conferred on him, meaning the Spirit of God residing within him, so that seventy elders may be filled with the same spirit. The way the story is told shows in a lovely way how Moses and his people thought about the Spirit. They imagined it as a rare and *limited* commodity. There was just so much of it around and if God wanted some more people to have it, God had to withdraw some of Moses’ spirit in order to confer it to the elders. All credit to Moses, that in spite of this belief he still agreed to God’s proposition! The story also shows how the giving of God’s spirit was understood to make a *visible difference* to the recipients. The text uses the word ‘ecstasy’, which some dictionaries describe as overwhelming bliss or self-transcendence. These elders have tasted something of the world beyond them, the invisible world of God, which enabled them to become co-leaders with Moses. They have received the *spirit of leadership*.

Then in a further twist the story tells us how a couple of elders missed the great occasion, the ‘proper’, liturgical bestowing of the spirit. How human this sounds and how familiar! When I was candidating for the ministry, I was asked what difference the act of ordination would make to me. I had to imagine missing my own ordination! Yet, in different contexts, don’t we sometimes miss out on the blessings of meeting with God because of ‘previous

engagements'? But here, in the generous economy of God the Spirit goes where it will and the missing elders also receive it. So, maybe I wouldn't have been a lost cause even if I missed my ordination.

Of course, we are not altogether pleased with this free flow of the Spirit. Don't we, like Joshua, begrudge it when the 'missing people', the 'outsiders' also receive God's favour? But here again, Moses demonstrates why he is worthy of his leadership role. He sees the bigger picture; personal pride has no place with him when it comes to God's business. His magnanimous view is: I wish that the Lord would bestow his spirit on all God's people. What a lesson on the day of Pentecost! God's Spirit moves well beyond our liturgical practices, well beyond our denominational or religious boundaries for the great purpose,

*That the earth may be filled with the glory of God
As the waters cover the sea,*

as one of our well-known hymn puts it.

The giving of the Holy Spirit, as described in John's Gospel brings back echoes of the beginning of the Bible. There, in the second Creation story the human being comes alive as God breathes into him the breath of life. According to this Gospel that's what the risen Christ does on the very day of his resurrection. He breathes on the disciples and says: "Receive the Holy Spirit". The experience of the event contains the elements of joy, commissioning to continue the work of Christ, with special emphasis being on the task of forgiveness.

The gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts could be called the *Spirit of communication*. After the traumatic events of the crucifixion, having encountered the risen Christ and witnessing his ascension, the disciples still had no voice. They were still huddled together in that upper room and occupied themselves with their own internal affairs of electing a replacement for Judas. Nobody dared to risk the question, which many of our churches are asking post-pandemic: do we really need that many leaders, just because tradition requires it? It had to be the dramatic intervention of God's Spirit that directed their attention to the more pressing matter, the need for communicating their amazing experiences with Jesus of Nazareth.

Setting aside the colourful description of the arrival of the Spirit, the result was as miraculous as they have ever witnessed in

Jesus' life. With the leadership of the same Peter, who previously couldn't even convince a slave girl in the High Priest's court yard, they were now ready to preach to a great crowd of pilgrims gathered for the festival of Pentecost.

Paradoxically, in our world today, with all its high technology, our communications with each other let alone with God is fraught with danger. Our words and messages can so easily get twisted and we may end up with misunderstanding and hurting each other. Peter and the disciples acquired *a different way of speech*, which could be understood by anyone regardless of who they were and where they came from. And this is what we all need if we want to make ourselves understood. We need it both in our interaction with each other within the church and also when it comes to talking to those outside the church.

Bill Loader, the theologian from Australia draws our attention to the fact that the members of the Jerusalem crowd were, in fact all Jewish who shared a national and religious identity. In one sense they were 'the in-crowd', even if coming from different geographical areas and may have spoken different languages. And isn't this true of our churches too? We share the same faith, we partake in the same rituals, yet we all come from different backgrounds with particular histories of our own. It is a miracle when we can live, worship and serve harmoniously side by side and don't fall out over duty rotas, storage spaces or car parking arrangements. That miracle is the work of the Spirit, which straightens out our imperfect communications with each other.

But perhaps we are in an even greater need, when it comes to passing on our faith to those outside the church. The criticism, that was recently voiced in one of our leading newspapers was, that we, as people of faith have developed a language that's almost impossible for non-believers to understand. If we want to be honest, we know we are guilty as charged. On the day of Pentecost we may not want to pray for the gift of speaking in tongues, but we may want to ask for better communication skills keeping in mind the quote attributed to St Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel at all times, use words if necessary!"

May the Spirit of understanding touch our hearts to receive the words God wants us to hear, and our lips to use the right words when we're called upon to pass the message on. Let it be so.

Erna Stevenson