

Pentecost - the great feast of communication

Stephen Brown, meditation at the Ecumenical Centre, 25 May 2010

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked '... How is it that we hear, each of us in our own native language? In our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power?'

When I heard last week that there was not yet a preacher for today, I jumped - maybe rashly - at the opportunity to offer a meditation this morning. For since I was very young, this has been one of my favourite texts from the Bible. I've never quite worked out why, maybe it is because of the action-packed nature of the story that the writer of Acts describes. Not a moment is lost in setting the scene. "When the day of Pentecost came, they were altogether in one place". Immediately there is the rushing noise of a violent wind, the tongues, 'as of fire' appearing among the disciples. And there is the transformation of the speech of the disciples so that those gathered from every nation under heaven can hear of God's deeds of power in their own language. And then, the wry comment by those that hear the disciples that they are "filled with new wine".

For some one, like me, who is involved in communication, this text speaks of communication in its most profound sense - and communication that involves all the senses. Here we encounter the physicality of the Holy Spirit: the sound and the touch of the wind, the appearance of the tongues of fire that take on physical form, resting on each of the disciples. In his book, *The Spirit of Life*, Jürgen Moltmann describes how the Pentecost narrative needs to be seen against the background of the Hebrew Scriptures, where God's Spirit *Ruach* has quite a different meaning from the western tradition of thinking about the Spirit. God's *Ruach* is not something supernatural or immaterial but is "a tempest, a storm, a force in body and soul, humanity and nature". *Ruach*, says Moltmann, is the "breath of God's voice". (1) So,

Pentecost is about communication of all the senses. It is this breath of God's voice that enables God's deeds of power to be heard by each in their own language. Pentecost is the great feast of communication.

Pentecost is sometimes described as the counterpoint to the account of the building of the Tower of Babel. The story in Genesis describes how at the beginning the whole earth had one language and the same words. Then the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from Babel "scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth". At Babel, so it goes, the nations were scattered, at Pentecost they are gathered together. Yet, look closer at the text. The tongues of flame do not create a single language; it does not mean that those in Jerusalem are speaking in one language. Instead, each person hears in their own speech. God's Spirit breaks down the barriers between nations, the barriers of culture, and the barriers of language. Being drawn together, being one, does not mean being identical. It means transcending the barriers that separate us, holding together our diversity in the power of the "breath of God's voice". This is a pronounced and profound experience of communication. And it is through this great "communicative act" that the disciples are able to communicate "God's deeds of power".

Still, if Pentecost is a profoundly "communicative" experience, it is also a profoundly "ecumenical" experience. At Pentecost in Jerusalem, representatives are gathered from "every nation under heaven", in other words, from the whole inhabited world, or, in Greek, from the oikoumene. It is at Pentecost that God's Spirit descends upon the oikoumene, gathered at this great ecumenical assembly in Jerusalem. So, Pentecost as the foundational event of the church is both communicative and ecumenical. Through God's embracing and inclusive Spirit we can comprehend the oikoumene in all its fullness, one in which that which was scattered is gathered together in a unity that transcends the economic and political divisions of the world.

In our spirit-filled ecumenical existence, communication is at the very heart. It is through communication that we can become one - not despite our diversity, but in our diversity; not as an end in itself, but to speak about God's deeds of power. Communication in the oikoumene - ecumenical communication in its deepest sense - has this two fold character: the holding together of the oikoumene, and recounting God's deeds of power in Jesus Christ.

What does this mean for us as people drawn from many nations under heaven, for those of us gathered in this Ecumenical Centre? What does it mean for our calling as God's sign of communication in the world?

Firstly, communication is not something that is added on to our programmes or activities. It is not (only) about the technical tools we use to communicate. Communication is at the centre of our ecumenical existence. As Philip Potter, once general secretary of the World Council of Churches, puts it, "The kingdom of God, and koinonia, community, a common life, communication, are one reality" (2). We need to find ways in which this becomes a reality in our life in the oikoumene, not as a task only for communication professionals, but in which we mediate the flow of communication within the fellowship of churches (3).

But, secondly, this communicative existence of the oikoumene is not something that stands in an either/or relationship with the task of professional communication and relating to the public media. The communicative act of understanding at Pentecost was precisely to make known God's deeds of power. In our globalised world, we need to use all means at our disposal, with all their ambiguity, to make known God's deeds of power. We need, as the hymn we are to sing puts it, "to find our tongue [and] tell the world what God has done" - whether using the Internet, or Facebook, or Twitter ... news stories, interviews, speeches, or even sermons!

There is, however, also a "third way" - maybe the most profound way - in which communication is at the heart of our spirit-filled ecumenical existence. Later in the passage from Acts we can read how the disciples continued to break bread together. Communication is also to communicate, to share together in the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, united in the oikoumene in space and in time, transcending the divisions of the world. Here we are called together by the love that unites that which has been divided. At this meal, even the inadequate disciples are accepted. This is the meal of the suffering Lord who is in solidarity with the oppressed, and the meal of the one who has risen, who sends us to renewed action (4). Yet it is also here, that our own divisions in the oikoumene become most apparent and most painful. Our communication together at the Lord's Supper is incomplete, is only a partial sign of the unity to which the breath of God's voice has called us.

At Pentecost, let us therefore listen to God's renewing Spirit who calls us to prayer and to action that this meal may no longer be a sign of our division, but a symbol of the unity that God intends for the whole inhabited world - a sign that that which has been scattered has been brought together in Christ. At this feast of communication, let us revel therefore in the gift of God's Spirit, who goes before us, making whole that which is broken, calling us to be God's Pentecost people, in word, in bread, in wine.

And to God's name be the praise and the glory.

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A universal affirmation*, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1992, pp. 40-40.
2. Quoted in "Communicating with Conviction", Issue Paper VIII, Discussion papers arising out of the life and work of the World Council of Churches in Preparation for its Sixth Assembly, Vancouver, Canada, July 24 to August 10, 1983. Geneva: WCC, 1982.
3. Cf: Konrad Raiser, Report of the General Secretary, in *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 52, no. 1, January 2000, p. 99.
4. Cf: Heino Falcke, Christ liberates - therefore the Church for Others, in *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 65, no. 2, April 2004, p. 183.