

Sermon Pentecost 31 May 2009
Rev Nathalie Dürmüller, Subject: Acts 2,1-13

Dear Parishioners

Last weekend I was in Edinburgh attending the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. For this assembly they invited delegates from all over the world. There were ministers from Namibia, Guatemala, Taiwan, Canada, New Zealand, Egypt, Switzerland and many more places. So it was a large group of various different people, but nearly all of them from a Protestant background. Of course it was extremely interesting to get to talk to some of the ministers and to learn more about *their* church and their Christian traditions. It was striking sometimes to discover how different we are in our understanding of Christian traditions, even though we have similar historical roots and we were all Protestant! One woman I met had studied theology but she was not allowed to become a minister, as their Protestant Church in Northeast India does not ordain women. She told me that they were fighting for their rights, but it was not at all easy. One minister was from Guatemala and in their church many of the Indios have become part of the Presbyterian Church. Whenever two different cultures like this merge some of the original religious traditions are kept, and mixed with the new faith. Therefore these congregations have to combat superstitious beliefs in their parish. But we don't have to go that far to realize that there are certain differences between churches. I talked once to a lady who is a member of the Pentecostal church and she is convinced that one is only a real Christian, which means baptized by the Holy Spirit, if one knows how to speak in tongues. On the other hand there are churches that are very hierarchical and strongly linked with their old traditions like the Roman-Catholic or the Orthodox Church. To understand their beliefs and customs is not always easy either. We have all come across these differences in one way or another. Whilst observing other ways of practising Christianity have you ever asked yourself: Are we talking about the same kind of faith? Do we really have the same Bible and do we believe in the same principal dogmas? This kind of question arose a few times in my mind during the Assembly in Edinburgh. From time to time I could not avoid thinking that what I believe in, is too different from what other Christians seem to believe and in a way it can be of some concern to realize the existing difference between the members of

all the churches. But then during a conversation with a minister from Taiwan I realized that this topic actually might have something to do with Pentecost. Pentecost is first of all linked to the descending of the Holy Spirit. This is what people tend to hear first when they read in Acts chapter two. Let me read it to you:

3They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Isn't this quite an amazing picture of flames of fire coming down on to the people in Jerusalem that day? Because this picture is so strong Pentecost is often linked with the descent of the Holy Spirit and with Christians experiencing some kind of ecstasy. But this ecstatic experience was a very special one. It was not only about this one particular feeling of the Holy Spirit that makes people tremble and maybe speak in tongues, but this story tells us also a lot about the *experience of unity*. It is mentioned that they all talked in different dialects, but still they could understand each other. Speaking a different language is a huge barrier when we are trying to understand one another. Even if we speak the language of the other because we have learnt it, still there is always a gap of knowledge and gap of feeling for the world of thoughts that lies behind a foreign language. All of us who live as foreigners here in the UK know this only too well.

So it is told in Acts chapter 2 that the first Christians experienced a very special kind of unity – a unity that overcame cultural boundaries. In the first sentence of chapter two we read: **1When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.**

In the original Greek text the word “one” is particularly stressed. This word underlines the subject of the whole story, which is being one, or feeling the unity between different types of Christians. So for me, the main subject of the story of Pentecost is that it wants to tell us that unity among very different types of Christians is possible, *but* it is happening beyond our normal understanding. At the end of the reading today it is suggested that some people had drunk too much sweet wine. So what was going on with these people wasn't easy to understand from the outside - it must have looked rather unusual. When I think back to the Assembly in Edinburgh with all those Christians coming from different countries, speaking their own languages and who are from other cultural backgrounds from ours I can hardly imagine something like the

unity of Pentecost could actually happen. I realize that rationally I will probably never fully understand how they practise their Christian faith nor in which way our religions are linked with each other. If nothing unusual happens then I will always feel the gap and I will notice the differences rather than the union between us. So actually only the Holy Spirit, or something that is beyond our understanding can make true unity possible. As I understand the work of the Holy Spirit, as it is described in Acts chapter two, it is a force that brings us together and that makes it possible for us to look at the side where we can see the similarities instead of looking at the other side where we feel separated from each other. This paragraph gives us the hope that we can experience this feeling of being united with other Christians! Of course we can't expect it to be there, when we want it to be, because it is something that isn't possible to control or to fully understand. It is somehow more than we can grasp with our rational minds and it is certainly different from ordinary every day experience.

Therefore normally we don't see the unity, but we might feel the separation. Even for people from the outside it is very obvious that Christians are not just one unity. There are so many different denominations and churches, that people, who are non-Christians must wonder, why we don't manage to be one united group of people. But this is how the reality is and always has been. Even in the New Testament we find examples of how different from each other the several Christian congregations were. And after all I don't think this is a negative thing, but I see it as enriching that we have all sorts of different denominations and Christian beliefs and practices. Why should we have to represent a unity and why don't we stress the differences among us and call it diversity? I actually think it amazing that the Bible is so full of diversity contents that it can be interpreted in uncountable ways. Depending on our tradition, our experiences and on our personalities we can read it in a way so that it makes sense for us. The challenge there would be that we don't judge others how they live *their* faith. And this is not at all an easy task. It is sometimes very tempting to think that actually the way I'm practising my faith is the best way and probably a little bit closer to the truth than what others believe. Maybe none of us manages to avoid this way of thinking from time to time. I think it needs real inner grandeur not to pass judgment on other people's faith and in general on their behavior. This is certainly not only true for the question of faith but also for any kind of relationship that we may have. I think the challenge is to stand

our ground and say: “This is who I am and this is what I believe in”, but at the same time that we don’t judge others. For this undertaking we need the help of the Holy Spirit day by day.

Amen