

Pentecost**Speak out**

Numbers 11:24-30; Acts 2:1-21

When to speak out and when to hold your tongue? Speech is silver, we are taught as children, but silence is golden.

The ongoing national scandal that is the Dominic Cummings case, and the poor political and moral judgement of the Prime Minister and members of his cabinet. No apology, no contrition. We're being told to move on and that no more questions will be answered, and that no action will be taken. I believe this to be unacceptable. It is not unreasonable to expect the highest moral standard from our Prime Minister, and his special adviser. If we are not being treated with contempt, we are certainly being taken for granted and patronised. When the Prime Minister and his senior advisor show no evidence in this matter of using a moral compass, the nation does not need to 'move on' by abandoning its road map of honourable action and decency. Speak out or hold your tongue?

President Trump, challenged by journalists about his actions, and now by Twitter about the accuracy of some of his unsubstantiated claims, threatens to shut down social media. Speak out or hold your tongue?

The death of an African American, George Floyd, in Minneapolis, where a police officer was filmed kneeling on the man's neck despite him saying he could not breathe. No one condones the looting and violence that has followed, but the spectre of racial violence by some raises its ugly head again. Black lives matter. Speak out or hold your tongue?

It is the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak. The prophets of the Old Testament, often portrayed as troublemakers of the nation, spoke out and did not hold their tongues. Jesus says, in the Beatitudes, that the meek are blessed and will inherit the earth, but He too, when provoked, spoke out in righteous anger when things were not right in the society of His day, and did something about it.

The day of Pentecost was the day God's Spirit, promised by Jesus, came to the fearful, tiny group of Jesus' followers. No great orators amongst them. Not many from privileged backgrounds. Not perfect people or plaster cast saints. But people from different backgrounds entranced by the fact that in Jesus of Nazareth they had found someone Whose outlook on the world gave them a challenge to go out and make it a place where people mattered, where lives were transformed, and where hope was given. When the Spirit came, they were given the power to speak out. They spoke out, in the imagery of the Bible account, in languages so that the whole world would understand the message of hope that Jesus came to give, then, and now.

"The roaring of a mighty wind, the speaking in tongues, acting as if filled with new wine, on fire with the energy and love of God – these are just some of the ways the Book of Acts tries to describe the event we call Pentecost. In that description, we witness the wildness of God's Spirit that infuses both individuals and whole communities. It is an ecstatic, joyous experience and unimaginably powerful.

What then can the passage from the (rarely visited Old Testament Book of) Numbers add to our understanding of the ways God's Spirit works in the world? Perhaps it can show us something about leadership – Spirit-led leadership."ⁱ

In the Numbers story a dark mood had come over the unhappy people as they wandered in the wilderness. They had food and drink, but not what they wanted. Dark moods come across nations at different times. We live through one now. Tens of thousands have died from a virus. Our freedom of movement has been, rightly, curtailed. Politicians and other leaders, many of them trying their best, are out of their depths. There are few blueprints to hand when dealing with a pandemic. Christian faith tells us not only to hope for but to expect for more. When the Spirit comes in the Old Testament book of Joel, it is so that young and old, male and female, might dream dreams, and then put them into action. When Moses, in the Book of Numbers, in despair, recognised that he cannot sort out everything for his people, he turned to God and confessed his inadequacy and need.

If we, at this time of crisis in our world, and in the time we emerge from this crisis, try to respond as individuals on our own, we will soon find ourselves in despair. The Pentecost experience and the gift of the Holy Spirit means that no one needs to carry any burden alone. For leaders, for anyone, God sends wisdom, patience, strength, and hope in every circumstance. Being encouraged, we speak out, and act up.

Martin Niemöller was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian. Niemöller was an anti-communist and supported Adolf Hitler's rise to power at first. But when Hitler insisted on the supremacy of the state over religion, Niemöller became disillusioned. He became the leader of a group of German clergymen opposed to Hitler. In 1937 he was arrested and eventually confined in Sachsenhausen and Dachau. He was released in 1945 by the Allies. He continued his career in Germany as a clergyman and as a leading voice of penance and reconciliation for the German people after World War II.

*First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out,
Because I was not a socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out,
Because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out,
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me,
and there was no one left to speak for me.*

In this fractious time, when people have sacrificed but are weary; when people have done the decent thing but are frustrated when others do not; when people have questions, but are told to be quiet, we need the gift of the Holy Spirit. The issues of social, economic, race and other injustices are not going to be any easier. People talk about a 'new normal' but that will not happen without hard work, changed lifestyles, and new priorities. If it would be a shame to waste the many lessons of this crisis, then what are we going to be inspired to do and become in the new future God is already laying before us? It will certainly require thinking outside the box. It will certainly require standing up. It will certainly require speaking out. It is not so very different from what Winston Churchill once said: "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."

Martin Luther King Jr. told of a midnight hour of despair in the early years of his leadership in the civil rights movement. He had received many calls threatening to bomb his home. He feared for his wife and his new baby daughter. He wondered if the struggle was worth it...Restless and unable to sleep one night, he sat at his kitchen table with a cup of coffee and spilled out his fears, doubts, and despair to God. "At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced Him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.'"ⁱⁱ

The Day of Pentecost is often called the birthday of the Church. New things happen. New opportunities present. New understanding comes. What this hard time has shown me is that I need to lift up my eyes again and see beyond. God's Spirit has blessed not just the Church but the community and world around, whether we like it or not. What does that say about God, and what does that say to us?

Gifted with minds, what will we think for God's future here? Gifted with hands, what will we shape for God's future here? Gifted with feet, what destination will we travel towards for God's future here? Gifted with voices, what truths will we speak out for God's future here.

The day of the Spirit. The day of the Church. It's here. It's now.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Carol A Crumley, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 3, p2

ⁱⁱ Ditto, p4 & p6