

A sound from heaven*Genesis 11:1-11; Acts 2:1-21*

Looking at the state of political discourse in our country, in European countries, in the United States, and in fact across the whole world, it's hard not to agree with public intellectuals who raise the concern of the Balkanization of society. "Tribal interests and ethnic identities (are) unravelling the fragile bonds of unity in culture. People of differing ethnicities, races and languages crowded together onto the small planet seem to spell trouble. The kind of social disintegration that occurred in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and led to ethnic cleansing is very real in every country. In the Hamilton by-election last week the narrow divide of the popular vote between Labour, the Nationalists and, in my view unbelievably the Reform Party, speak of a population divided, demoralised and disengaged. It is hard to know what the question is if anyone thinks that the answer is a political party, like Reform, or a political leader, like Donald Trump, hell-bent on ironing out diversity and difference and seeking to manipulate a culture based on cloning where everyone looks, sounds and thinks the same. The echoes with 1930s Communism and Fascism are beyond chilling.

The Day of Pentecost, with its earlier echo in the Tower of Babel, is a Biblical contradiction of and challenge to the flattening out and watering down of church and community. Where a populist political tendency is to force conformity, the Holy Spirit on Pentecost as the Christian Church begins to form embraces it. When the world goes monochrome, the Spirit goes technicolour. When the world seeks micromanagement down to the last detail, the Spirit explodes onto a wider horizon. When the world introduces restriction and constraint, the Spirit brings a bewildering

freedom that eventually from what seems like chaos comes Creation, and order according to how God sees things and wants things.

When the world produces contradictory cacophony, a sound from heaven rings out, not with a single note, but with the chords of Creation. What we see on the Day of Pentecost is the rich diversity of what God desires for the world and the people within it.

The disciples are gathered in the upper room, almost certainly the same one in which they had shared the Last Supper with Jesus. Were the doors still shut, for fear of the outside world and persecution? It was barely seven weeks since the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus was physically gone, but what next? The disciples were still, let's face it, a dishevelled, mournful and confused band, not a gathering of superheroes.

And then it came, as they gathered, this might sound so loud that it could not be ignored. So startled were they that they lost control of themselves. Something had happened. This incoming of the Spirit broke down barriers, inhibitions, uncertainty, doubt, and these timid, frightened individuals found themselves saying things, being things because God Spirit touched them and filled them.

When their world had seemed deadened by fear, confused by despair, all of a sudden something happened and they changed. They were transformed. Not one of them was excluded. The sound from heaven filled the house where they were, something looking like tongues of fire appeared, and they began to speak in a multiplicity of languages, a roll call of peoples represented in that place, so that the whole world, as was intended, though speaking in many languages could hear the message of God's mercy and love, for them. A breathtaking reversal of the Tower of Babel story where proud humanity was divided by a plurality of languages. Now each person heard and understood what God was saying to them. This sound from heaven broke over the whole earth.

God was not silent; God was still speaking and has been speaking ever since. The sound from heaven unified them, without imposing uniformity upon them. The Spirit of Pentecost comes to God's Church so that everyone can hear the good news. The sound from heaven is to be heard in every language. The same breath that had blown Creation into existence in the poetry of the Book of Genesis blew again to give birth to the Christian community.

The Holy Spirit is often thought of as the forgotten part of the Trinity, proceeding from the Father and the Son. It is the way of understanding the dynamic of God at work in the world today. 'What does this mean?' was the question forming in the minds of those who witnessed the phenomena of Pentecost. It is still the same question people might ask today.

What sound from heaven would it take for God to catch our attention? Would we lift up our heads for a moment from our iPhones and computer screens to take notice? A few weeks ago, going by bus into Edinburgh city centre in the early morning, every single person on the top floor was hunched over screens. A beautiful sunrise, trees in blossom, our city waking in lovely weather, even an ambulance and fire engine going by with sirens blaring, and all the heads down, reading something on screens. Have we shut the world out so much and restricted our world view to a screen a few inches square? And if we did at last notice, what would it mean, and what would we do in response? If a noise came from heaven, what do you think it might be saying to us?

Last week Mirjana Spoljaric, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross said that humanity is failing in Gaza. It is becoming unbearable to watch the suffering of the people unfold daily. She said that the situation has, *"gone beyond any acceptable legal, moral, and humane standards...Gaza is now worse than hell. It has become a hell on earth."* To the world, to us, what would a sound from heaven sound like? DO SOMETHING.

Last week in New York at the United Nations a draft resolution sponsored by Algeria, Denmark, Greece, Guyana, Pakistan, Panama, the Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Slovenia and Somalia

called for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza received the backing of all of the permanent Security Council, including the United Kingdom, but was blocked when the United States at the direction of President Trump cast its veto. To the world, to us, what would a sound from heaven sound like? DO SOMETHING.

Many wrongly convicted sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses have still not received full compensation from the Post Office. To the world, to us, what would a sound from heaven sound like? DO SOMETHING.

In 2017 72 people were killed, and a further 70 were injured in the Grenfell Tower fire in London. The 23-storey tower's cladding is believed to have contributed to the rapid spread of the fire. Eight years later in Scotland and in the rest of the UK Governments are making painfully slow progress to deal with these potential deathtraps. To the world, to us, what would a sound from heaven sound like? DO SOMETHING.

The Church of Scotland, seeking to reshape, reform, reorient in this C21st, with some willing to work towards change whilst others stick their heads in the sand and harken back to a time decades ago when they think things were better (and probably weren't). To the world, to us, what would a sound from heaven sound like? DO SOMETHING.

With so many sounds from heaven - it's a wonder that we can hear anything at all!

What Pentecost reminds us of is that God then, and now, still speaks. In the public square of life, where politics and economics and laws are promulgated. In the private areas of life, in our lives when things that we do and say, behaviour patterns that we adopt and support need challenging, sounds from heaven are also to be heard. What does God have to do to catch our attention? To make us stop, and question, and wonder, and reflect, and change where change is needed?

Which is why the season of Pentecost is so radical, and unsettling as we are brought by God into places where we must think about what we are and what we do and why we do things. And are

those things right and fair and healthy and true. We might be at the beginning of our lives, a young person about to venture out into school and university and college and the world of work. We might be in the midst of our lives, with responsibilities and choices to make. We might be in the latter years of our lives, with wisdom from right and wrong to share. But into all of our lives, a sound from heaven, reminding us of God. He's still speaking. To all of us, today. Listen. Think. Act!

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

Amen