

## WHAT DIVIDES US AND WHAT UNITES US?

Acts 2: 1-18, 21

How many of you took in some if not all of the Coronation of King Charles?... It was amazing to see all the people come together in London, across the UK and across the commonwealth too. Those gathered were united around a faith in what they believe the monarchy provides: the stability of an institution that goes back many centuries in the face of so much political and social change.

But as many people united to celebrate this once in a lifetime event, many also united in protest. “Not my King” was on many placards. Recently, Jamaica was one more nation within the commonwealth to leave, a trend that will probably continue. If it wasn't so complicated legally and constitutionally for Canada to leave the commonwealth, I expect we would not be far behind based on recent polling.

And this is but one example of so many issues in society that unite us even as they divide us. Is it gun control, abortion rights, gender equality, racial protests against police violence. Even as people unite over many issues in our society, they are divided like never before. Covid has only made this worse, and with people spending more time online than ever, social media perpetuates this polarization amidst the uniting of people into various groups. While people feel deeply connected with their group and its beliefs and ideology, they are also deeply opposed to other groups with different beliefs and ideologies.

But let me add one more layer to all this – democracy and free speech. Both are under threat, but not necessarily from the same side. Democracy is threatened by a wave of dictatorial leaders like Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. While Xi Jinping doesn't care much about democracy, and Putin claims the Russian people support him, Trump has won rule and sustained it by convincing enough people that all criticisms of him are fake news. This has fed a whole world of conspiracy theories and false information which pandemic times have only made worse. Everything is questioned today like never before and it is difficult to find any source of authority enough people trust. This also undermines everything from medical information to the democracy of a political process. If people cannot trust any of our institutions or credible sources of information and expertise, the future is fearful.

But equally so, even as many of us feel threatened by right wing propagandists who threaten our democracy and trusted institutions, we cry out if the majority moves towards decisions that undermine human rights. If the majority want to maintain liberal gun ownership or a total ban on abortion, or more restrictions on refugees and immigrants or ban trans rights and

access to supportive healthcare, or refuse to increase taxes to pay front line workers and PSWs better, do we support that even if it's the majority?

If the majority are tired of hearing appeals of indigenous peoples to settle more land claims even when it means more money from the government and therefore all us Canadians, do we support the majority? If the majority do not support stricter environmental standards and restrictions to curb if not reverse climate change when it also means restrictions to our carbon heavy lifestyles, do we support the majority because this is democratic? If the majority are getting tired of black lives matter protests because of police violence or whistle blowers calling out our sports and military institutions for gender abuse, do we go along with the majority? Absolutely not! Justice and right are not beholden to majority rule even if this is democratic. Minorities have rights even if they are minorities and even if the majority don't want to give them any more than they have. Mother earth needs to be heard even if we refuse to hear her cries.

And this brings us to another issue that divides us even as it unites us – free speech. Is free speech an absolute right? What if it's false information and willfully so in order to manipulate and deceive for personal gain? And what if free speech is hate speech or an excuse to re-traumatize those already abused and mistreated historically? Is holocaust denial taught by some teacher in school or spoken in the press free speech, or is it misinformation and hate speech which retraumatizes those survivors and their families who have suffered through that history?

On the other hand, if free speech is not protected does that make our societies like those in Russia, China or Iran where any criticism of power or government policy is silenced by violent suppression, imprisonment and worse? How do we find wisdom, truth and balance so that we support freedom and oppose oppression, but also do so with responsibility and vigilance for minority voices and marginalized communities? Wow! Lots here to figure out!

Well, before we get to the story of Pentecost in search of some revelatory guidance, let me go back to something written even before the story of Pentecost. In the first few centuries of Christianity, Plato the Philosopher and his philosophy were considered precursors to Christianity. Plato's hero was Socrates, a moral teacher who was considered a Christ figure by many Christians in the early years. Why? Because both Socrates and Jesus taught people that truth and justice were rooted in a larger Good or God not beholden to those who held power in the world. This made Socrates and Jesus a threat and enemies of the state. They were accused of corrupting people's minds and making them restless for change. And so, both were arrested, imprisoned and killed.

But Socrates and Jesus were killed by majority will too. Plato's most famous writing is called "*The Republic*", a book written in Greece some 400 years before Christ. It describes the ups and downs of democracy as it evolves in Athens. It's all about tyranny and how the tyranny of

one dictatorial ruler over several regimes evolves into the tyranny of the majority. This is how Plato interpreted what happened in Athens – the birthplace of democracy. For Plato, the fact that the majority population, manipulated by misinformation, envy and hate supported the execution of Socrates, reveals that the majority will of the people is not always right. The very same thing happened to prophets before Jesus and to Jesus himself. The majority brought together by a corrupt and power-hungry leadership cried out for blood and for crucifixion. Sure, it's better for the majority to decide rather than one person. But the will of the majority can be disastrously wrong even if it is the majority.

And so, how do we discern what is true from what is false, what is better from what is worse, and what is of God and the Good versus what is evil? Now we are ready to appreciate the story of Pentecost.

While the Holy Spirit, (which is the Spirit of God in Christ) is manifest throughout time, the story in our scripture reading tells of a momentous occasion when a group of Christ followers experienced the Spirit publicly during a major festival called Pentecost. People had come to celebrate the festival from all over the world where Jews had been scattered over centuries of colonial invasion, enslavement and displacement. All the peoples and places mentioned in our reading reflect the diversity of people gathered in Jerusalem. While the first part of our reading identifies the racial and cultural diversity of the people gathered, the prophecy quoted by Peter also highlights the diversity in age - elders and youth, gender - men and women, and social status – slave and free. All of them are to be equally recipients of the Spirit.

Later in Acts, the diversity of inclusion also extends to an Ethiopian Eunuch reflecting further gender and racial diversity, and the finale is a Roman military official, who represents the enemy of the Jewish people. His name is Cornelius, and he is gifted with the spiritual awakening of the Spirit, and the early Christian leaders must listen to the Spirit's call to them to welcome even a Roman military leader like Cornelius and his people.

So what does all this mean? Wind and flame, mentioned in our reading, are symbols of the Spirit, but they also reflect forces of nature that are beyond human control. Think about all the fires and storms people are facing in Canada and throughout the world and how even with all our modern infrastructure and technology the damage and loss are overwhelming. On the other hand, wind and flame are symbols of transformation, of surrendering in trust to forces that awaken you and take you to places you have never been. And clearly, in the case of these early Christ followers, the experience of the Spirit as wind and flame transformed their capacity to connect with others in ways beyond anything they could imagine before.

Whatever we may think about the possibility of multiple languages spoken through the Spirit, let's not get sidetracked by any literalism. Language much more profoundly is about communication, connection, interaction, and ultimately, inclusion. The world of the early

Christians is a highly divided and polarized one. Even as Jews and gentile converts are gathered in Jerusalem because they want to be religious together, they have a lot of mistrust, hate and animosity for each other depending on who they are and where they come from. Race, class and gender are big issues. Being Jew or gentile is a massive wall of division. Is your first language Hebrew, Aramaic or is it Greek and some other dialect from the world you have grown up in, studied and do business in. Is your accent rural Galilean or high class Jerusalem city? Do you work with the gentile world for convenience, commercial benefit or as a collaborator? You see, the world then is no less different than the world now in terms of the reasons people are divided.

So what does the Holy Spirit speaking bold praise in the language of each person gathered communicate? The Holy Spirit communicates connection. It communicates faith and hope in what the power of love can yet do in a polarized and divided world. OK. So what does such love look like?

First of all, The Spirit recognizes and cherishes diversity as a gift of God. Love rather than fear must be the approach to diversity. We approach others to learn who they are and to discover the beauty of who they are. As we do this, others are encouraged to cherish their distinctiveness and to share it with us. Speaking in the language of another is moving into their world rather than forcing them to assimilate and fit into our world if we are to accept and include them.

Second, this also means we especially seek out those who are marginalized with voices and languages that are hidden or a mere whisper because they are afraid of the majority that dominates. The love who is the Holy Spirit seeks out diversity wherever it is to be found. And whenever some voice silenced is heard, or person marginalized is discovered, it is like treasure we uncover adding further colour to the diversity that is God's creation.

But this also means, third, that compassion is more important than exclusion even when exclusion is the democratic majority will. The Holy Spirit always challenges us to move in the way of compassion even when it goes against the grain. The inclusion of Cornelius the Roman military leader and his people eventually creates a split in the church and it certainly pushes many people away from joining the church. Doing the right thing because it's the loving thing and the just thing will not necessarily bring people on board and it may divide even as it seeks to unite. Seeking inclusion and seeking healing and reconciliation may upset those who do not want us to pursue these and they may be the majority.

Finally, love as justice must sometimes oppose the majority even if such opposition is labelled "undemocratic." Of course, we must protect democracy and ensure all voices are heard. We must fight to make sure democracy truly reflects the interests and welfare of all people equally.

But we know that our democracies are also flawed. Prejudice and discrimination of all kinds shapes public opinion and majorities often rule out of fear and hate rather than love.

So then, democracy is better than the tyranny of one person or a small group of power-holders unelected by the people. But the justice of love and the movement of the Spirit as wind and fire are not beholden to the democratic majority either. Free speech is important and people need to speak out against injustice and be loud and proud of who they are without fear of being attacked or silenced. On the other hand, when free speech is fuelled by hate and fear and when it taunts, mocks, humiliates and threatens those who have been abused and mistreated by the majority, we need to make such speech accountable and responsible to a higher standard of love and justice.

Finally, the most powerful energy and conviction that must fuel our voice and vote must be love for people and especially the kind of love that respects and protects diversity rather than crushes it because we feel threatened. We must learn how to better love and love better, and this must be a growing thing. We must question what it is that threatens us, why we feel threatened and if it is fear and hate that are fuelling our resistance, suspicion and animosity.

May the Holy Spirit truly find us and move through us this Pentecost, so that we become ever more truly the hands, feet, heart and voice of Christ in our world today. Come, Holy Spirit, come... Amen.