

Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, 'What does this mean?' Acts 2.12.

So what does it mean, this Pentecost thing with winds blowing, flames of fire coming down on the disciples' heads, and speaking in tongues? (By the way, have you ever wondered why bishops wear those weird mitres on their heads? They represent the flames that rested on the disciples' heads at Pentecost, Acts 2.3...) But what does it all mean? The people were genuinely perplexed; they had never seen anything like this before. There was excitement in the air, and somehow all these people speaking different languages were able to understand what these uneducated Galilaeen fishermen were saying, vv5-8... You'll always have the sneerers, the reductionists who can explain everything away. 'Oh, they're just drunk'. Reductionists like that little word 'just'. Being in love? It's just electrical charges in your brain!

Well, what does this mean? It seems to me that all human behaviour can be divided up into what brings people *together*, and what drives them *apart*. There are those who are bridge builders, and those who put up walls. God is *love*, and he always brings people closer to him, and closer to each other. God is a bridge-builder. The *devil* likes putting up walls. He sets people *against* each other. His weapons are lies, distrust, fear. Jesus summed him up in *John* 8.44, on p1074.

Joiners-together and dividers, bridge-builders and wall-builders. What is this 'sin' thing that we keep speaking about in church? It's more than just a bit of lust and laziness. Martin Luther brilliantly defined sin in a play on words in Latin as *cor incurvatum in se* - the heart turned in upon

itself. The God of love gave us each a heart to reach out to him and to our fellow human beings, to build bridges to God and each other. Sin is when we refuse to do this; when we build a wall to shut God and other people from our life, and want only to love ourselves. 'The heart turned in upon itself': in other words, it's the right instinct gone wrong. And all the world's ills come from this human condition.

For to be bothered only about yourself and your own is the natural state. It is the survival instinct. But God's plan is to move us all on from this. He wants to unfold our heart; to turn it *outwards*, to *him*, and to others. God came among us in Jesus, to shew us how to love. He is the great joiner-upper, reconnecting us at the Cross with God and with each other. St Paul in *Ephesians* has a lovely phrase where he calls Jesus 'our peace', for he has made the two, Jews and Gentiles formerly walled off from each other, one. P1174, *Eph2.13-14*.. (In our world of wars, of fractured families and relationships, of haves and have-nots, how can anyone say that Christ's gospel of reconciliation is *irrelevant*?)

At Pentecost God came to us in the Holy Spirit to change human hearts. The task of the Spirit is powerfully to build bridges, hooking us up to God and to each other. Can we turn to that great passage in *Gal 5* that we just read, p1172? Joiners and dividers. In v17 you can see how 'the sinful nature' (the 'flesh') and the Holy Spirit are dead opposites. Just look at vv19-21... They're the things that split up marriages, divide communities, cause strife in the office. But look in v22 at what the *Spirit* produces ... and it's love, joy,

peace, patience &c which make relationships work, and which bring people together. V24 speaks of conversion, of *change*..

This is what happened at Pentecost. God came *powerfully* to Peter and the disciples in the Holy Spirit and *changed* them. No longer were they cowards hiding behind bolted doors; now they were up and telling others about Jesus. No longer were they just looking after their own selfish interests; they were now becoming a *community*, a *group*, working together. The Spirit at Pentecost gave birth to the *Church*, that family of God where selfishness is outlawed, where no-one is boss except the Lord Jesus, where people care for each other. At Pentecost the Spirit *changed* the disciples' nature from looking inwards to reaching out, from weakness to strength, from selfishness to sacrifice, from self-centredness to Christ-centredness.

There's a wonderful passage in *Acts 2* on p1094, vv42-47... Such caring and sacrificial giving aren't natural; only the Holy Spirit can change naturally selfish human nature. Just go on to chap4 on p1096, vv32-35... In v 36 we meet Barnabas who sold the field and gave *everything* for the needs of the other believers. But in chap5 we read of Ananias and his wife Sapphira who *also* sell a property. They also give the proceedings for the needs of believers, but they keep a little back for themselves - just in case, 5.1-2... They lie about it, and are struck dead. Vv3-10... It's a great story, but I'm afraid that I'm more like Ananias and Sapphira than Barnabas. Imagine that the church had really practised that early communism. How the world would have listened to us!

Only the Spirit can turn our hearts from self to God

and to our neighbour. Don't we speak of the '*fellowship, the sharing together* of the Holy Spirit'? Let's pray that God's Spirit will come upon each of us, and upon our congregation, to make us more Christlike, as he did at Pentecost.

Pray to be filled with the Spirit that you may look away from self and *outwards* to the needs of others. Pray for the Holy Spirit to come upon our congregation. Coming to church is not coming to a lecture or a sing-along. It's being part of a *family* where we all go out of our way to get to know each other and to care for each other. Make it your goal this morning to get to know someone here you didn't know before. Tell them your name. The Spirit wants to join us together.

This Wednesday we induct Ian Connell as our new President of Churches Together in Harrogate. It was scandalous that for generations so-called Christian churches didn't talk to each other. We are all on the same side, working together.

I spoke of Barnabas, the son of encouragement. The Barnabas Fund encourages Christians persecuted and discriminated by people of other faiths. These are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We care about them.

This week we begin Christians Aid. The poor of the world are our brothers and sisters. The devil would have us build a wall to shut them out from our consciousness. But they belong to our family and we want to go out of our way to care for them. Work like Christian Aid is Christianity at its best. This is the Holy Spirit building bridges, joining people up, rich and poor, east and west, to help each other. Community, the *Church*, was born at Pentecost. *That's* what it means.