

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 31st May 2020**  
*Acts 1: 6 – 14; John 17: 1 - 11*

After ten weeks of lock down, for those of you stuck inside with someone you love, how is your relationship with them going? Here's something that might help.

If we are to feel that our relationships within other people are good, we need more positive signals than negative ones, fifty-fifty doesn't work.

Research has shown that for two people to be happy in a relationship the perfect ratio of positive feeling and interaction to negative feelings and interaction is 5:1. We need five times as much positive interaction from our partners as negative interaction in order for us to feel good about a relationship.

Here's another example. If four people tell me that my sermon was good, it takes only one telling me it was awful, for me to think I'm a poor preacher. I need my ego massaged by five people for every critical view if I'm to build confidence in my preaching. That's true of everyone in every walk of life.

This is only to be expected. Focusing much more on the negative side of life than on the positive has to be a result of our evolutionary past. In the past, negative information was much more urgent, even life threatening, so we had to act on it quickly. If you were warned by our fellow caveman about a lurking sabre-toothed tiger, you had to listen, prioritise the information, and act. Those who didn't were edited out of the gene pool.

People are rightly cautious, fascinated by fear, and prioritise negative information over positive information. But, all of that changes in retrospect. When we look back on events, we balance out the negative and the positive, increasingly so over time. Offer a new mother, an hour after the birth of her first child, the opportunity to go through childbirth again, and she may demur. Fortunately for many people, over time she comes to change her mind.

The same is true of holidays. Most people, looking forward to some summer sun, feel excited anticipation. Ask most people a few days after they return, and they offer mild disappointment. But from then on, things start to pick up. The further the holiday recedes into the past, the happier are the memories of the villa, the beach and the local taverna, while the crying baby on the plane, the arguments over directions, and the tension between everyone's competing hopes for the day, all dissolve into happy reminiscing.

Whether it is sabre-toothed tigers; the number of date-nights that couples enjoy; comments on sermons; childbirth; or happy holidays; people - you and I – focus on negatives when we worry about the future, and then, after the event, we start view the past through increasingly rose-tinted spectacles.

That is true too, for today's celebration of Pentecost. Pentecost is the festival we celebrate 50 days after Easter Day. We celebrate for good reason. Easter Day formed the bedrock of our faith. At Easter we remember how God revealed to Jesus' disciples his good news that the power of love, above all else, to transform people's lives cannot be defeated. Even when it is murdered, it rises up and lives on. Easter revealed that God is a God who draws us to him, and draws us to each other, through the power of love, not a God who condemns us to live with him, and with each other, in a relationship of petty judgement.

Pentecost is our celebration of the moment that Jesus' disciples realised that this good news message about the power of love to transform people's lives was not something they could keep to themselves. It was at Pentecost that they realised that if they kept this message to themselves it would become diminished, drained of its power, diluted. If you keep love locked up, it evaporates.

If Easter confirmed to us that God is a God who loves us with a love that never dies, then Pentecost displays the truth that love flourishes when it is shared. We celebrate Pentecost because on that day the disciples were filled with a spirit of holiness, the Holy Spirit, that did two things. Firstly, it bound them together as a community, a church, and they became Christ's body on earth. They were individuals, each different from the other, but at Pentecost they became the vehicle by which God would spread his love across the earth. As our reading from First Corinthians said, "... there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone."<sup>1</sup>

Bound together by this holiness of spirit, the Holy Spirit then drove these disciples out in to the streets of Jerusalem, and then onwards and outwards across the world. The first thing they did after the Holy Spirit filled them with a determination to release the good news was to tell people of Jesus Christ. As our reading from Acts said, "... Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them,"<sup>2</sup> - those "... devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem..."<sup>3</sup>

We celebrate this Pentecost every year - just as we celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas every year, and his resurrection at Easter - because on this day of Pentecost, the church, Christ's body on earth, was established. And, urged by a spirit of holiness, the Holy Spirit, the good news of Jesus Christ's life was spread by that church across the world and throughout time, to rest on each of us gathered to worship God today.

But, to fully appreciate this festival, we should appreciate also that, while from the safe distance of two thousand years Pentecost looks like nothing but a celebration, to those first followers of Jesus, it was much more than that.

For while we look back at Pentecost through rose-tinted spectacles, they lived looking towards the future with apprehension and fear. We forget that following Jesus' crucifixion these disciples were initially overwhelmed with grief, they were then transfixed by the miracle of the resurrection, they spent a lot of time either back in Galilee at their old jobs or in Jerusalem locked away afraid of being identified as followers of Jesus.

For them the future was not full of excitement and action inspired by God's spirit. For them the future looked precarious and threatening. And they were right to feel this way. Many of these disciples, if not all, would be martyred. The Pentecost we celebrate, cost them their lives. When Peter stood up and preached the church's first sermon – the one we read this morning – he was signing his death warrant. Within a few years he would be executed in Rome for preaching what he first preached in Jerusalem.

While we look at the past and celebrate, these disciples looked to the future and were filled with fear; justifiably so. We shouldn't forget that.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 12: 4

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2: 14

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2: 5

What is it that gives people the strength and the courage and the determination to unlock their doors and step out of the houses of their fears and in to a new future – at personal risk to themselves and to those they come in to contact with?

Of course, it would be easy to say that the Holy Spirit drove them out, filled them with confidence, shattered their fear. But, that Holy Spirit wasn't just a supernatural "...sound like the rush of a violent wind,"<sup>4</sup> as it is described in our reading from Acts. That Holy Spirit was a spirit of holiness within those disciples that was born of their shared experience of living with Jesus Christ. But, they were also driven out by a realisation that if they did nothing but stand and look in to the heavens for Jesus Christ to return, the love, and the message of good news that they held in their hearts, would start to drift away, to evaporate in to the sky, and form clouds high above the earth, remote from any human being.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus offered the world life in all its fullness, eternal life. In the Gospels of Luke and John Jesus' commandment to us is to love God and love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Life is lived in all its fullness when it is shared; it dies when it is locked away. Love flourishes when it is shared; it evaporates when hearts are locked up.

Those disciples who knew Jesus Christ were filled with a love that was so strong, and a life that was so full, that it eventually burst out of them – they reeled about and spoke like drunkards. That's the Holy Spirit - lives lived filled with the spirit of love for God and our neighbours are holy lives.

It will be hard, of course it will. But, if we want to live our lives, and if we want others to live their lives, we can't stay locked away. From this side of the lockdown it looks risky, we are afraid, we might be putting our lives on the line. And we are right to feel this way. But, if we step outside in order to love each other and live, then one day we will look back on the moment we did so with jubilant celebration.

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 2: 2