

Today we end on a high note! Today – the Day of Pentecost – marks the end of what’s often called the “Sacred Year” that we repeat year-in-year-out throughout our lives on this fragile earth, our island home. It’s not a secular year – not 365 days – but really about six months. It spans from the First Sunday of Advent to today and it follows the same pattern every year: we begin with the Messiah’s birth, follow his baptism, his public ministry, his journey to Jerusalem, his confrontation with the “Powers That Be”, his execution as a threat to the Empire and the Status Quo, his resurrection and, last week, his ascension. So last week was the last week of Jesus’ sacred journey.

That brings us to today – the end of that Sacred Year, but not the end of Jesus’ sacred story – that, as I just said, was last week. Rather, an ending that, today also marks a new beginning – perhaps not just “a” new beginning but “The New Beginning for those who followed....including us.

The New Beginning – or perhaps, to use some famous words of WWII British Prime Minister Winston Churchill – “the end of the beginning”.

As I observed of the story of Jesus’ Ascension last week, “sometimes leaders have to step aside and allow space for the people they’ve been leading to come most fully into their own.” For Jesus’ closest friends and earliest followers that has now happened, and happened in a way that they all remembered and experienced as joyful. Gone, now is the puzzlement, the fear, the hiding, the ineptitude, the chosen failure. All have replaced with joy – not by a hollow, “happy-clappy” joy – but something much more profound, much more solid, much more real.

It’s a joy that could and can only be experienced by those who know what pain is, who know what living ethically and with integrity costs, and who have discovered that the journey that includes both is a journey best made with like-minded companions, with others who also know about pain and living with integrity AND who are also trying to do so in ways that build up others, that build up the fellowship and the world.

This is the day when that new life begins. And it definitely is that: New Life. The pain of Good Friday hasn’t been lost, but incorporated, with the subsequent experience of Jesus’ resurrection.

That experience is exactly what the Book of Revelation means when it refers to God as saying “Behold, I am making all things new.”(Rev. 21:5).

That is the central truth of the age of the Spirit that we all entered into on that first Day of Pentecost. With the coming of God’s Spirit the “making all things new” stuff began in earnest!

However, Christians have, for 1700 years, done a pretty good job of trying to ignore that truth! “Behold, I am making all things new”. We’re much more guilty of repeating what one person jokingly referred to as the “Seven Last words of the Church” – which parallel Jesus seven last words: “We’ve never done it that way before”!

After Jesus’ seven words he died. The implication of the Seven Last Words of the Church is that

we will die, too, if we keep refusing to recognize that at the heart of God, at the very heart of creation, is change.

So what about the story?

- There's followers of Jesus afire with the Spirit of God.
- The tragedy of the Tower of Babel – where God gave everyone a different language so they'd fail at their construction project – that tragedy reversed! The believers speak languages they didn't know they could speak.
- A new community gathered and sustained not by a man but by the indwelling Spirit of God.

“The believers speak languages they didn't know they could speak.” As long as we continue to understand that sentence as meaning something like “I never knew I could speak Greek!” – or French, or German, or Russian – as long as we take that language literally we'll never really understand the implications for us! There is, of course, some advantage to taking it literally – we don't have to do anything but say “wow”!

What, then, does that phrase really mean?

Learning how to live a life of discipleship is, for some of us, “learning a language we didn't know we could speak”.

Learning that it is possible to live a life of love and compassion in community even with those people we may not like is, for some of us, “learning a language we didn't know we could speak”

Learning that the heart of faith isn't wrapped up in one ethnic, theological, or ecclesiastical identity but belongs to all creation is, for some of us, “learning a language we didn't know we could speak”.

Learning – as much as we may hate it – not only that change is the ONLY constant in existence but that we can actually do it if we try is, for some of us, “learning a language we didn't know we could speak”.

And – sometimes – it means, quite literally that we and our heirs in the faith will “learn...a language we didn't know we could speak”. That's what Peter's saying in today's passage from Acts: “Your sons and daughters will prophesy....will see visions and...dream dreams.”

The result, metaphorically, of that new language is that things might get a little tricky for a while! When we start being who we are called to be it can threaten the status quo a little!

Ultimately, though, that's the core of the Pentecost story – that this new community of believers were gifted the ability to “learn...a language [they] didn't know [they] could speak”.

Only one thing remained – and remains: to embrace the Spirit's gift, and to learn the new languages; to become “multi-lingual” for the Lord.

May it be so on this day and always!

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