

## Sermon - Pentecost 2020

I don't think I'm the only one who's been thinking a lot about family lately. In my case, it's because today is a very significant day in my family...on this day 50 years ago, my parents were married in a small church in coastal South Carolina. They had both just graduated from university the previous week, and my dad was a newly-commissioned Air Force officer. Neither of them could have predicted what the next 50 years were going to be like, but that day they were making a start: forming a new family and getting ready to start a new life together. And I think it's very fitting that this significant anniversary happens to fall on Pentecost this year, because I think Pentecost is also about new families, new starts, and unknown futures, so that's what I'd like to talk about this morning.

So first, what do I mean by "new families" being formed as part of Pentecost? Well, as always with Scripture, it helps to look at context. Nowadays, in Western civilisation the concept of "family" is anything but straightforward. There are all kinds of combinations in our society of what would be considered family: some ties are biological, while others, like adoption, are made by choice. Divorce and remarriage have become common, resulting in blended families, and some people have such bad relationships with their biological families, that they develop a chosen network of friends that they deliberately identify as their new family. And while some of these constructs are the sad result of brokenness in human relationships, the resulting structure might be a good thing. Biology is still a very strong bond, but where love is present, biology can sometimes prove irrelevant.

But we have to remember that in first-century Judea, the picture was very different. This was a society and a culture built on biological ties. As a Jew, your whole identity was wrapped up in what tribe you were born into. Think of the long genealogies in the books of the Old Testament and echoed by Matthew at the beginning of his Gospel account...these **really** mattered. Being able to trace your blood ties gave you a place, a purpose, an identity in Jewish society. Think of Paul in his letter to the Philippians establishing his authority as a Jewish leader by underscoring his nationality and his tribe. Someone who was cut off from his family and his tribe was effectively a non-person, because he had no other way of identifying himself. This is why it was so shocking when Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him and he announced that his real mother and brothers had nothing to do with biology. This would have been unthinkable to a first-century Judean.

But, of course, what Jesus was doing was hinting at what was to come, when God would introduce a whole new type of relationship with humanity which had nothing to do with what family one is born into. He does this on a couple of other occasions, too. Think of his first miracle in the wedding at Cana: his mother Mary asks him to do something about the wine running out, and he addresses her in that odd way, calling her “Woman”. In the Greek, it’s γυναι (gunae), and it’s how one would address a stranger, someone who is no relation to you. Now this is from John’s Gospel account, and John is very keen to emphasise Jesus’ identity as the Son of God, so he has Jesus starting out his public ministry by breaking an identity based solely on biological relationship. Mary has no particularly special claim to a relationship with him any more simply because she is his mother. But Jesus does this one other time with Mary, when he is dying on the cross and he sees Mary standing with John. Once more he addresses her as γυναι, woman, before telling her that from then on John would be her son and she would be John’s mother. It signalled a new kind of family, a family of faith rather than biology.

So why is this important at Pentecost? Well, after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, it was clear that something new had started. But it wasn’t immediately clear to the disciples where they were to go from there. It wasn’t as if they had a pre-packaged religion all set up, complete with a “Welcome to the Church of England” brochure and a copy of Common Worship ready to go. They only knew that Jesus told them to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. But how was that going to happen? And how would they know when it arrived? And what exactly **is** the Holy Spirit? Their whole world had been turned upside-down and none of the old familiar structures of society and family and religion seemed to fit quite rightly anymore, but how was this new “Jesus movement” supposed to operate and what would drive it? But, of course, we know that all changed very dramatically on the day of Pentecost. Suddenly, the Holy Spirit arrived and suddenly the disciples were full of a power they’d never experienced before. They knew exactly what to do to witness to the Gospel, they knew exactly how to communicate their message...even in languages they didn’t know! There was no mistaking for the disciples that it was the Holy Spirit that would drive this new movement and give them purpose and direction.

And it can still happen that way now. I have heard accounts I believe of dramatic encounters and sudden and unmistakable signs of the Spirit acting in someone’s life. But the Holy Spirit isn’t just a magician who appears on the stage of life in a puff of

smoke and dazzles us with a display of supernatural brilliance. It's much more subtle and much, much deeper than that. The Spirit is the new bond that ties us to God and to each other. It is the new relationship brought about by Jesus' death and resurrection. The love that ties families together, in whatever form a family takes, is only a faint sketch of the love that ties us to God in the Holy Spirit. And the new family, the family of faith, is tied together with this bond that is so strong that even death cannot break it. It means that our identity doesn't come from kinship or nation or tribe, our identity comes from our relationship with God, from the Spirit of God that is given to each one of us.

And that can be a scary thing...this new family, this new start. Even if you've been a Christian for a long time, there is still often the worry that God is going to call you out of your comfort zone. And God very often does just that, prompting us to act or speak up in situations that scare us, asking us to live with circumstances that make us uncomfortable. We cannot be followers of Christ and stay silent when we witness injustice or suffering. But remember our Gospel reading today: when Jesus appeared to the frightened disciples behind a locked door, twice in the space of a couple of short verses Jesus says "Peace be with you." Our peace doesn't come from comfortable surroundings or easy circumstances or maintaining the status quo...our peace comes from God. So it doesn't matter what situation we're in or what God is asking us to do, our peace is knowing that God is with us in the Holy Spirit and will never leave us. And that's why Pentecost is so important to us. That's why our prayer today and always is for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Amen.