

Acts 2:1-8; Romans 8:14-28

It's the Day of Pentecost, sometimes described as the birthday of the church, when a group of confused and bewildered followers of Jesus, holed up in a room in Jerusalem, received the Holy Spirit of God. And suddenly those timid disciples were reborn into a bold and unstoppable movement that spread out to the ends of the known world. And birthdays can be noisy affairs. They are times of rejoicing and partying and they can prompt complaints from the neighbours, and the birthday of the church was no different. And what I want to do today is to consider first the sound of Pentecost, what was heard on that day – to consider it as an audio event - and from there I want to go on to consider sounds of the Spirit: what we might hear when we listen for the Holy Spirit of God.

So let's begin with that day in Jerusalem, when Jews from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, one of three great annual festivals – originally an agricultural festival, but one which had become associated with the giving of God's Law centuries before. And when we listen we hear first a sound 'like the rush of a violent wind'. New life is blowing through the lives of the disciples and they are being empowered to take on the world with their message of Jesus, crucified, risen and ascended. Then, next, we hear the sound of babble – except that it is not just noise, but those disciples speaking in other languages as suddenly those people from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem for the festival hear their own language being spoken – and we will return to the significance of that later, but for now it is a sign that the message that these Jesus people are proclaiming is for the whole world. It comes out of Israel, it emerges from the Jewish faith, but it is for everybody – every tribe and tongue and nation. The sound of the Day of Pentecost is what we would call polyvocal – various and diverse. And if we had read on we would find that this message proclaimed with such joy in so many languages sounded suspiciously like drunkenness: these Jesus followers were inebriated, as people sometimes are on birthdays – except that these people were certainly not drunk.

These, then, are the sounds of Pentecost: the sound of wind that surges with new life; the diverse sounds of God reaching out to all the world; the sound of joy, confused with drunkenness. I want, though, to probe further into the sounds not just of the Day of Pentecost but of the Holy Spirit generally, for this is one noisy Spirit.

I want to identify two sounds particularly associated with the Spirit, and for the first one I want to do a little Bible study which takes us back to near the beginnings of God's people Israel, when they were living in the land of Egypt. You may recall that the people of Israel, descendants of a man called Abraham, had migrated to Egypt, and there they had prospered. But there arose a king, a Pharaoh who treated them very harshly and enslaved them. As we read in the Book of Exodus which tells this story, 'The Israelites groaned under their slavery and they cried out.' Now, that is the sound of oppression, the sound of exploitation, the sound of injustice, and it is described here as a groan, a moan, a sigh. It's a sound often associated with other sounds: the cracking of whips, the crying of hungry children – and sometimes the drunken laughter of those who profit from oppression. That verse, however, that describes the slaves' groaning does not end there for we read on that 'out of their slavery their groans rose up to God and God heard their groaning...' In other words the ears of Israel's God are attuned to these groans. They reach him and they provoke him to action.

Well, from there – from furnace of oppression in Egypt – let's jump forward hundreds of years to a scene outside a tomb in a village called Bethany not far from Jerusalem. In that tomb lies a man named Lazarus who has died of an illness, and outside the tomb stand his sisters who are desolate in their grief. And if we listen to that scene we hear the sound of grieving, the weeping of the sisters and of friends and loved ones. But among the friends stands one in particular and he weeps too. But he does more than weep. We are told that he 'groaned in his spirit'. And here we are witnesses to a stand-off. Here witness a confrontation between the power of death at work in the world, spreading its deadly infection, and the one in whom God's will for life is embodied. Outside

that tomb in Bethany death collides with life and there is a groan – and in no time Lazarus is stepping forth from the tomb. As in Egypt, so in Bethany - a groan prompts the action of God, and release.

Well, from here I would go lastly to our reading from Paul's letter to the Church in Rome from which we read earlier, and here we find groaning again. This time it is the whole creation that is groaning. It's as if Paul puts his ear to the ground and he hears groaning, or sighing as he also describes it. And maybe it's the groaning of people struggling with the injustices of the world, or the futility, or maybe it's the groaning of those with coronavirus or other disease, or maybe it's the groaning of animals facing extinction or maybe it's the groaning of the oceans as they're poisoned, but deep down this is the sound of creation in pain. It's a fearful sound. There is something new here, however. Notice how Paul describes this groaning: he calls it labour pains. As he puts it, 'we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now...' Now, when pain becomes labour pain, everything changes. This means that the Holy Spirit is a birthing Spirit, and that in and through all the sighing and pain God is bringing something new into being.

This is the Spirit by which the Hebrew slaves in Egypt were birthed through the waters and into a new life. It's the same Spirit by which Lazarus' tomb in Bethany became a womb from which he emerges. It's the Spirit of God who turns the pain of the world into labour pain. And that is why Paul can finish this section by declaring 'that all things work together for good for those who love God...' Even the worst circumstances can be constrained to bring good to birth. Evil does not have the final word.

So that's one sound of the Spirit: the groans of labour. But this passage from Romans introduces us to another sound of the Spirit, also connected with birth. Earlier on Paul writes, 'when we cry, 'Abba! Father! It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.' Now Paul is referring here to the very special relationship that Christians have with God whereby we get to call God 'Abba', the word Jesus used to address God. It's the word that a child would use to address their father and it combines respect with intimacy: 'papa' might be a good equivalent. And of course Jesus taught us to address God as Abba, Father, in the prayer he taught us, 'Our Father in heaven...', and in the Gospels that prayer is recited in Aramaic. What is interesting here, however, is that Jews of Jesus day would only have prayed in Hebrew, their traditional, ancient language – just as Muslims today only recite their traditional prayers in Arabic. The Jewish recital of prayers in Hebrew expressed the Jewish conviction that they had a unique and special relationship with God who had chosen them in love.

But Jesus teaching the Lord's prayer in Aramaic was a radical change: it meant that for Jesus there was no 'sacred language', no 'language of God'. He dared to teach us to pray in Aramaic because with his coming that special relationship with God was no longer the sole prerogative of the Jews – it was being extended to all people. And so on the Day of Pentecost people from all over the world heard the disciples speaking in their own language: because here the Holy Spirit of God was reaching out to all humanity, drawing them all into God's passionate embrace.

Now some people have difficulty calling God 'Father'. After all, if you have had a bad experience of fatherhood it can stick in your throat to call God 'father'. It may have too many bad, destructive associations. But Jesus completely redefined what fatherhood meant when it applied to God. He told a wonderful story about a young man who turned his back on his father. He left home, taking the inheritance that would one day be his due, and he ran off into a far country and there he squandered that inheritance until there was nothing left, and he was reduced to the status of a slave, feeding pigs, unclean animals, something terrible to happen to a Jew. And when all was lost he decided to return to his father, hoping that he might be received as a servant in his father's house. And while he was still a long way from home his father saw him and was filled with compassion and ran down the road and threw his arms around him, threw his arms around his pig-smearred son, risking defilement. No self-respecting Jewish father would ever do such a thing. It was unthinkable. In fact no dignified Jewish father would even run in public! But this was no ordinary Jewish father. His heart was wider, his compassion deeper. And so he brings his son home, and puts a clean robe around him, and a ring on his finger, and he celebrates with a feast.

That's what God's fatherhood means. And he opens his embrace not just to those who speak Hebrew but to all his beloved children, even when we have wronged him. As Paul puts it, 'when we cry 'abba', father' - or we cry it in any language under heaven - 'it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.'

The Day of Pentecost, then, was a noisy day, a day of loud diversity and what appeared to be drunkenness. But there are other sounds associated with the Holy Spirit. The sound of groans being turned into labour pangs; the sound of things, even bad things, being constrained to work for good. And the sound of God's children crying 'Abba, Father', as God runs down the road to meet us and embrace us and welcome us home. Amen .