

Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London  
Hugh Valentine  
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Acts 2.1-21

## I'll have a slice of what they're having... (Pentecost)

You may think me seriously uninformed when I tell you that at the start of this year I gave up on the news. Since then I have avoided all TV news programmes and daily newspapers. The only exception is the occasional five minute news bulletin on Radios 3 or 4. The surprising thing is that I don't feel uninformed – indeed, the opposite: there is now more room in my head for being usefully informed about the more important stuff. Along with all this has been a corresponding decrease in a sense of unhappy impotence in the face of the world's craziness.

Of course, the odd nonsense sometimes gets through. It happened yesterday when I read of the poll in which 2000 randomly-chosen Christians were asked to name the political party leader they thought most like Jesus. 46% said the current Prime Minister - Mrs May - reminded them most of the Son of God. Jeremy Corbyn had this effect only 27% of respondents; Tim Farron, on 20%. The joint-leaders of the Greens got only 3%. 2% of respondents said that of the current party leaders it was Paul Nuttall, of UKIP, who most reminded them of Our Lord. What do you make of it? It is all very puzzling.

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**Pentecost:** The promised gift of the Holy Spirit. AKA the Advocate, the Comforter, the Counsellor, the Holy Ghost. Clichéd church-speak calls Pentecost the church's birthday, though that seems far too domesticating an idea. How else might we approach it, understand it?

The great thing about curiosity and enquiry in the human adventure is the choice of tools with which to go exploring. Sometimes the tools of logic and reason; at others, poetry and the poetic imagination; at others irony and humour; and of course, experience - the experience we each gather and is uniquely our own.

And, I reckon, we should add another tool, that of *love*. That's not in the slushy sense but in the sense of love being a *form of appreciative*

*understanding*, a form, itself, of knowledge. The things we love, we *know* in a particular way.

You might say: 'ah! you should add *prayer* as a tool in this kind of enterprise', but I don't - only because I don't find it helpful to regard prayer as a stand-alone mode in itself, but rather as all and any - and more than! - the modes just listed. Prayer is less a *thing*, more an *attitude*.

So may I offer an approach to this event we call Pentecost for you to consider, on the day when we recall this clearly significant stage in the life of the early Christian community?

I make a note of things that catch my attention. Mostly they cover what people say, and how we behave, and some of the many ironies and contractions we humans are such exponents of.

One that came to mind as I observed the formulaic examples of non-communication which appear to take hold at General Elections, and as I thought about Pentecost, is a phrase I first heard when invited to preach in the US. I have only ever heard it used in the States. The phrase is 'shut-ins', used routinely in American parishes to describe parishioners who are house-bound and need to have the sacrament taken to them, and to be visited so as to relieve their isolation.

They are the 'shut-ins': that is how they are spoken of - even listed as such on service sheets and parish bulletins.

What a term! And reductionist, as much jargon is. Yet it is concise and graphic. It tells you what it is describing. I delighted in the irony of it, for it carried the obvious implication that the rest of us are not 'shut-ins', when any half observant fool can see that we all *are*. We are all 'shut-ins'. Even the most mobile, busy, globe-trotting of us are 'shut-ins'. We are all shut-in to some degree, in some way. Mostly, of course, we are shut-in within our egos - that misleading voice of the incessant and insistent 'me'.

And we are 'shut-ins' in a variety of opinions and attitudes and perspectives which we partly collect and partly inherit - inherit from the circumstances of our birth, and the culture in which we live, and the working conclusions we draw.

We become 'shut-in' within and by the education we get (or are denied); by the opportunities which come our way (or don't); by the choices we make, the relationships we enter, the kind of work we end up in, by the roles we take on. If you have the same quirky take on the ways of the world, you'll enjoy such linguistic teasers. They can be great teachers.

And you might also see how the image of being 'shut in' is a very good substitute (translation, really) for the church's historic preoccupation with *sin*. We've made such a dead and heavy weight of personal 'sin', there's no getting out from under it; whereas if we use the model of our being a 'shut in', somehow finding the door out seems more possible (indeed, more inviting). And what does sin do, but shut us in?

Ruskin said "A man wrapped up in himself makes a very small parcel." And a woman, too. Being a 'shut-in' is to short change ourselves on the possibilities life gives us. It diminishes. In it, we wrap ourselves up as a very small parcel indeed.

You heard the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. It conveys a busy, excitable, picture, and a sense-stopping one. Something happened, it says, and what happened was significant.

What happened was something to do with the 'shut-in'-ness of those people, illustrated in the story by the different and mutually incomprehensible languages, being suddenly blown wide open. And those who were 'shut-in' by tribal, ethnic, linguistic and other narrownesses were suddenly electrified by a new energy and purpose and hope. They stopped being 'shut-ins'; they suddenly became the '**let-outs**'. They experienced both inclusion and liberation.

The text seems to suggest that they exhibited the few positive signs associated with alcohol consumption: "*..these are not drunk as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning*". (I've always thought it touching that Jerusalem drunks apparently behaved themselves until cocktail hour). So what we might infer is a *dis-*

inhibiting effect of the gift of the Spirit; and it is inhibition which makes us 'shut-ins' as much as any house-confining frailty. The *dis*-inhibiting effects of alcohol are short-lived and can be paid for by a really terrible price. According to the New Testament, the dis-inhibition brought about by God's Spirit is deeper, by far. It is liberating. Its side-effects only good.

Some of our fellow Christian explorers take this account of Pentecost seriously, and literally, and find that speaking in tongues as described in Acts is their experience, and they judge it a Godly one. You will make of it what you will. But I hope you might consider that one way of understanding it is metaphorically: that to live attentively *with and for God*, and to follow Jesus as faithfully as you can, is to become progressively *less* a 'shut-in' as we find the language of our hearts and minds no longer ours alone **but a language shared**, and understood by and with others.

And perhaps there is a warning to be considered here: to long only for the same dramatic experience in our own lives as chronicled in Acts runs the risk of our **remaining permanently in an unrealised the future**, and so remaining 'shut-in' to the presence of God's Spirit in the world *now*.

We are all shut-ins to some degree; perhaps most of us to a greater degree than in our delusion we realise, or in our fear we admit. Our wellbeing (truest, deepest, wellbeing) depends on ceasing to be a 'shut-in', and in getting out more: out from delusion and away from low-life desires, living ever more (as best we can) in this eternal moment, and in being able to reach out a hand to other shut-ins as they too move from their own isolations, incomprehensions, alien tongues and familiar cells of confinement, doing so through their own pentecosts.

In this most vital process of life's jigsaw, says Jesus, we may call upon the presence and power of God's Holy Spirit to break free, and to break out. Amen.

Hugh Valentine