**Acts 2:1-21**

**Pentecost: Jerusalem and Antioch in unity**

Was there ever a time at St. Andrew’s that we can call ‘the golden age of the church’? Is there a period in this church’s history that we can look back at through rose-tinted glasses and say, “Ah, that’s when St. Andrew’s was really St. Andrew’s…”?

 There is a temptation for all of us to look back in time for a golden age, isn’t there? A time when we felt most comfortable with church, or maybe a historical era that we have read about when it seemed that all was good between the church and the world. But, of course, the reality is that no such time ever existed.

 I am spending an awful lot of time at the moment researching the history of St. Andrew’s to put together funding bids for the Bell Tower restoration and other fabric projects that we might want to do in the future. And certainly, we do sit today in an extraordinary building with an extraordinary heritage.

 We probably all know about the links with Henry VIII here, and you may be aware that Thomas Hardy got married here, and that John Keats came here when he was at school. But did you know about our mention in the Domesday Book or the 8 altars that were spread throughout the church prior to the Reformation? Did you know about the few remaining 16th-century pieces of stained glass window and the window dedicated to a 19th-century local MP? What about our amazing brasses dating back to the 15th and 16th-centuries dedicated to people like William Smith, who was a courtier to Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I? Have you noticed the wonderful monuments for people like Francis Evington, a 16th-century Alderman of London, or Henry Middlemore, Groom of the Privy Chamber to Queen Elizabeth I, or Thomas Boddington, who was Director of the Bank of England and the founder of Sierra Leone?

 This church is, of course, steeped in history - and there is a temptation to look back to all this as a ‘golden age’ that needs recapturing.

 That, of course, is something that is common to our faith community throughout the ages: we have always looked back for a golden age, haven’t we? The Old Testament begins with a telling of a story of a time that was an idyllic Paradise: Adam and Eve in a garden with God. The Israelites in the wilderness constantly moaned to Moses about how much better off they were in Egypt. Throughout the Bible, there are stories told of people looking back to some sort of golden age that, of course, never really existed…

 And perhaps when we read the story of this first Pentecost, we fall into the same trap. We can read this story as if it were the ‘golden age’ of the church, and that if only we could somehow recapture the spirit of Pentecost, then all would be wonderful and well with the church today.

 Now, Pentecost was a wonderful occasion, of course. It wasn’t first and foremost a Christian celebration. Pentecost was a well-established Jewish Celebration that was actually their Harvest Festival and a celebration of the giving of the Law by Moses. So it was a dual celebration: thanking God for the fruits of the earth and thanking God for the fruits of the faith, expressed through the Jewish Law. It was an exciting, noisy Festival when thousands would gather to renew their connection with God and with one another.

 And, of course, it was a Festival of great hope for the future. The fortunes of Israel and the Jewish People had risen and fallen over the centuries since Moses and they were now waiting on God’s blessing to visit them again; to restore them once again through the coming of a Messiah who would hopefully free them from the shackles of Roman occupation.

 So on that Pentecost Day recorded in Acts chapter 2, the Jewish people were gathered to celebrate their past, to give thanks to God for all his blessings on them in the present, and to look forward to a new golden age that would surely dawn soon.

 And, as the passage from Acts graphically describes, the Holy Spirit was poured out on them that day with rushing wind and tongues of fire and in great power. The Holy Spirit came and the believers proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ, and thousands of people responded that day. And the result was a new communal understanding in which new believers devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and shared their possessions with one another and worshipped and prayed together on a daily basis.

 A new community was born that day. And we are tempted to think that this was indeed the ‘golden age’ of the church: the moment that we should aspire to and hope for once again…

 The only problem is that this was no golden age…

 It is true to say, I think, that the greatest barrier to future success is past success. If things go wrong in our lives or we make mistakes, we are happy to learn from that and do things differently, or better in the future. But when things have been successful in the past, we are far more likely to get comfortable with that and not want to change anything, because, well, it has always worked OK for us. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”.

 There is a tendency for us to think that if something has worked in the past then it is bound to work in the future. So we standardize the way we do things. We create systems that solidify our organizations and activities. We look back to the Golden Age of how it worked well and create systems that try to hold on to that, or replicate that.

 But that is fundamentally flawed thinking – for any organization and especially the church. Just because something worked in the past does not mean that it will work in the future. Past success does not guarantee future success.

 And if Pentecost teaches us anything, it must surely be that God has a new work before us and that he doesn’t want us to fossilize and hold onto the past in such a way that it prevents him from doing what he wants to in the future. There is no ‘Golden Age of St. Andrew’s’ to hark back to: there is only a continuous story, a narrative of God’s historical intervention in Enfield and the story of a church that has continually changed and adapted to work with God in mission.

 And the same was true of that Pentecost Day in Acts 2: it wasn’t a golden age of peace and harmony in the church. In fact, it was just the beginning of a story fraught over the coming years with major problems…

 The introduction of so many newcomers to the community brought very real tensions. Some of the newcomers were welcomed because they seemed to fit in quite easily but others did not receive the same welcome because they did things differently, enjoyed a different way of worshipping and had different expectations about how the community should develop. The new mix of Jews and Gentiles caused huge problems. This seeming ‘golden age of the church’ was actually a time of jealousy, anger, arguments, suspicion and misunderstandings.

 The newcomers were looking to the future with all its exciting possibilities but many of the established members were looking back to a Golden Age of when it had been comfortable and small and more intimate.

 Scratch below the surface on that Pentecost Sunday – and there was friction in the community…

 And it is interesting to see how things unfolded for the church over the following chapters in the Acts of the Apostles. How did the church grow?

 Well, the apostles – the established members of the community - stayed in Jerusalem in the shadow of the Temple, in their comfort zone, and undertook their mission from that position. But the newcomers, like Barnabas and Paul and so many others, were open to new possibilities and took the message of Jesus Christ out into the world and eventually established a new base for the church in Antioch, not Jerusalem.

 The apostles who stayed in Jerusalem did some wonderful work: they built up the community there and offered great pastoral support to one another. And the newcomers who moved out to Antioch and beyond did wonderful work too: they brought so many new people to faith and expanded the church beyond all their wildest imaginations…

 The apostles needed the newcomers and the newcomers needed the apostles…

 And, you know, the same is true for us at St. Andrew’s today. Some within our church family are quite comfortable with how things are and are more than content to enjoy the fellowship with one another and provide pastoral support, love, care and friendship with a group of people they have known perhaps for many years. And that is a crucial ministry, and we need people to do that. But there are others within the church family with itchy feet; who want to see St. Andrew’s expand and go in new directions and spread our wings in new, creative and innovative ways so that the church ministry grows beyond our wildest imaginations. And that is a crucial ministry, and we need people to do that.

 The key thing for us, at this stage in the life of St. Andrew’s, is not to fall into the trap of resenting others who see St. Andrew’s differently from how we do and not to resent the different passions that exist in this church family. Those who are comfortable must encourage and support the others who are looking to the horizon and those who look to the horizon must encourage and support those who are comfortable.

 We need each other.

 We need both Jerusalem and Antioch.

 So this Pentecost Day in Acts 2 was not a ‘golden age’ of the church. It was the beginning of a new period, a troublesome period, in which this new community began working out how to be the people of God through diversity. Interestingly, it is not until Acts 11:26 where we read this: “And it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians”. Everything between Acts 2 and Acts 11 was a sort of gestation period where the faith community was working out how to hold Jerusalem and Antioch in tension, and I suspect that is very similar to where we are at with St. Andrew’s today.

 Jerusalem and Antioch: the comfort zone of the familiar and the excitement of the unknown future; both equally important, both requiring the support and encouragement of one another.

 Pentecost was not the Golden Age.

 The Golden Age is now, and is yet to come.

 Every single day is the Golden Age of the church, because we are where we are and we are what we are – Now…and there is nothing else.

 And, of course, the message of Pentecost is that the church can only be what it is and can only become what it needs to be in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit at work in the community of Christ that ignites us in mission, communicates passion for God, and overcomes the language of division and enmity with the language of unity and love.

 The promise of Pentecost is that each one of us can be ignited by the Holy Spirit and that each one of us has a crucial part to play in the mission of this church, whether that is the Jerusalem mission or the Antioch mission: both are equally valuable.

 This year at St. Andrew’s, we have some really big decisions to make about our future and much of that is encapsulated in my recent Report called ‘Towards 2030’, which I hope you have had a chance to read and think about. The PCC will be discussing this Report on 5 June and, as a result, we will be drawing up a new Mission Action Plan that will shape our thinking, practice and development over the coming years.

 We want a Mission Action Plan that encourages both Jerusalem and Antioch; a Mission Action Plan that is infused by the power of the Holy Spirit in such a way as to guide us to become the church that God longs for us to be.

 We will need courage and determination, I think, to make some big decisions, and I ask you all to pray for your PCC as they lead us forward into God’s future. But just as importantly, please think and pray about what you can do to encourage and support the mission and ministry of this church. Think and pray about how God’s Holy Spirit can work through you to strengthen the ministry of this church.

 You may feel more comfortable in Jerusalem – enjoying the security of our history. Or you may feel more comfortable in Antioch – itching to get on with new, pioneering initiatives. Wherever you feel most comfortable – there is a place for you in the mission-life of St. Andrew’s.

 This Pentecost Day, pray for God’s Spirit to guide you, to fill you, and to ignite your passion so that, together, we can be the people and the church that God has destined us to be.