Pentecost - A different community and a different Spirit
Acts 1:1-9; 2:1-4; 2:14, 32-47

Let me begin by asking you a question. How do you explain the very clear increase that we're seeing in many of our western societies, in the number of people who say they're lonely and have no close personal friends or even anyone at all who really knows them? How do you explain that?

David Brooks, the New York Times journalist and author of the recent book, *How to Know a Person*, calls what we're witnessing 'relational disintegration.' And in her recent book, *Generations*, the American sociologist, Jean Twenge, lays the blame at the door of technology. That smart phones, and the social media they make possible, have drastically reduced real-world connections and face-to-face interactions, with the result that, far from increasing our social connectedness, we've lost community. Because time spent on gadgets, rather than talking to the person next to you; time spent thinking 'why are they having a better life, or marriage, or more glamorous holiday than me?', or 'why wasn't I invited to that party?', leaves people feeling more lonely, anxious, and isolated than ever.

Now let me ask you a second question: How do you read the Bible? And I don't mean, 'in bed, with a cup of coffee, before I get up.' I mean, do you read it as disconnected stories giving you moral lessons for life, *or* do you read it as you should: as one, great interconnected story pointing you to Christ?

A story within which there's a subplot, that from beginning to end, from God walking in the garden with Adam and Eve, to the grand finale of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven to earth, God is building a community of people with him in the midst of it.

And it's that real, embodied community, with him - and not ourselves - at it's worshipping core, that holds the answer to our relational disintegration.

Which is where Pentecost comes in.

A Different Community
Now Pentecost doesn't come out of nowhere, does it? Luke tells us that between his resurrection and ascension, Jesus spent 40 days with the disciples, 'speaking about *the kingdom of God*' (1:3). Then on the day of Pentecost itself, Peter says, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God…he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing" (2:32-33). And "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him *both Lord and Christ*" (2:36).

And Christ means 'the anointed one', the King, and as we saw last week, Jesus' ascension was his coronation. And having sat on his throne, the King pours out his Spirit to see his kingdom extend and expand.

But what does that look like?

Well look what the Spirit creates when he comes. Peter preaches his sermon, and v41-42, 'those who received his word were baptised… and they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' And v44, 'And all who believed were together and had all things in common' and v47, they were 'praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.'

So when the Spirit comes he creates deep and thick community - a taster of the kingdom. A community that's learning - they're devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the word of God. A community that's loving and caring - they're coming from multiple diverse backgrounds from all over the Roman world, but they're looking out for each other, even if it costs them financially. They're a community that's worshipping - worshipping God, in prayer, and breaking bread, and praise. And they're a community that's proclaiming the gospel - because they're growing in number, so someone's talking to and inviting their friends.

And yet, the community of the church is not the only community that gets mentioned at Pentecost. Look at v40 where Peter says to the crowd, "Save yourselves *from this crooked generation*."

Why call them that? Well, just 50 days before, they'd crucified Christ. As Peter says to them, v23, "This Jesus… you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." So almost certainly, some in the crowd had been present in another crowd, at Jesus' trial, demanding that Pilate release Barabbas and crucify Jesus.

But when he calls them a crooked generation, he's got another event in mind, from over a thousand years before. Because despite being rescued from slavery in Egypt, in the wilderness Israel began grumbling and rebelling against God. And Moses calls them, Deut 32:5, 'A crooked and twisted generation.'

And so Peter's saying to the crowd in front of him 'Look, this culture, this society, this crowd you're a part of is doing what it's done before - it's resisting and rebelling against God.'

But of course that's not just a problem for *their* culture. Look what Paul writes to the Christians in Philippi, who are in a very different setting, but who, he says, are, 'children of God without blemish *in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation*, among whom you shine like stars' (Phil 2:15).

Which means that every generation, every culture, is *crooked*. Because think what that word crooked means. It's the word, σκολιος, from which we get our word *scoliosis* - a curvature of the spine.

So to be crooked is to be bent out of shape, to be misaligned, to be curved in. And that can happen in two ways.

Firstly, at ***an individual level***. Look at what Peter says in v 38, "Repent and be baptised everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of your sins*." And our sin - wanting to decide for ourselves what's right and wrong, or - like the ancient Israelites - rebelling and grumbling against God for what he allows to happen in our lives, or resisting his love and grace in Christ - like the crowd in Peter's day, or like the Philippians in Paul's, running after the gods of sex, or success, wealth or pleasure, our sin bends us out of shape, warps our loves and desires, and curves us in on ourselves.

But there's also ***a community level,*** a group dynamic, what our culture does to us. It's why Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds' (Rom 12:2). Because in any culture, there are influences at work that we may be totally unaware of, that we just think are normal, but that are distorting our souls, misshaping what we most value, and putting us out of whack.

Just think how that works in our day. You see one of *the* defining ideas of our time is *expressive individualism*. And in an essay entitled 'How Expressive Individualism Threatens Civil Society' Carl Trueman describes it as the belief that 'human beings are defined by the individual psychological core, and that the purpose of life is allowing that core to find social expression in relationships. Anything that challenges [that] is deemed oppressive.'

But think what that does to community. Because there's no better way of killing relationships - that community depends on - than by always insisting you must have your way and no one can say otherwise. I mean think how that would work out in a marriage or a family. To always prioritise yourself, it to be like that member of a team who always keeps the ball to himself, and refuses to pass, and so consigns the team to yet another defeat.

Or think of our current culture's obsession with personal freedom, and the resistance to any limits on that freedom, whether commitment to others or submission to figures in authority. And yet all the best things in life, like love and friendship, marriage and children, restrict us and narrow us down, they limit our choices.

Or think of the pursuit of happiness - and you should do whatever makes you happy. But if you make your personal happiness the goal of your life you'll never be happy, because you'll always be thinking, maybe something else would make me happier. But give yourself to making others happy and you find yourself being happy.

So putting ourselves first, or pursuing freedom at all costs, or making our happiness our ultimate, all stuff that our current culture tells you to do, leaves us misshapen and deforms our desires. It leaves us angry with others who we increasingly see as a threat not as a neighbour. It leaves us addicted to stuff that we think will make us happy, but whose effect always wears off; and it leaves us incapable of creating or sustaining the friendships and families that really would make us happy.

So, as Peter says, we need forgiveness for our own sin, but we also need to be saved from a crooked generation. We need a different kind of a culture, a different kind of community - a community that's learning, loving, worshipping a God greater than ourselves, and spreading the message that invites others in.

But to create that kind of community requires something better than us following the spirit of the age.

A Different Spirit

And the way he tells it, it's clear that Luke wants us to see that this learning, loving, worshipping, proclaiming community that's gathering in the wake of that first Pentecost is the work of God's Spirit.

Before he ascends, Jesus promises the disciples, 1:5, "You will be baptised *with the Holy Spirit*." On the morning of Pentecost, the disciples, 2:8, 'were all filled with the Holy Spirit.' Then Peter tells the crowd in v38, that if they repent they too 'will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'

And so as God comes and lives in them by his Spirit, it's him who's empowering this very different community.

You see, why are they growing and learning by devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching? Because it's the Holy Spirit who opens our hearts to understand and believe God's word. You see on the night he was betrayed, Jesus said to the disciples, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth… He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:13-14). And if God's word is inspired by God's Spirit it's not hard to see why these first converts have a hunger for God's word.

You see, everyone's trying to teach you, everyone's preaching at you. So to create real and deep community, we need saving from the kind of teaching that says, put yourself first, prioritise no. 1. But how are you not going to be conformed and bent out of shape by that message when it's everywhere? Well, Pentecost tells us, by being filled with God's Spirit, because he will turn your heart to God's word.

Ok, but why are they sacrificially loving and caring for one another? I mean, they are coming from all over the known world, and they probably hardly know each other, if at all, and yet they're going without so that each others' needs can be met. Which means something is helping them love others more than themselves. And for you and me to do that would require something totally countercultural to the spirit of the age and it's narrative of self-love.

So what gives them that self-less love? Well, look at what Paul writes in Romans 5:5, 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.' And in Galatians 5:22-23, he says, 'The fruit of the Spirit is love… kindness… self-control.' The kind of self-control that can reign in your spending so you have more to give away. The kind of kindness that sees need and moves towards it. And the kind of love that welcomes those who may be very different from you. It's why in his Pentecost hymn, Charles Wesley calls the Holy Spirit 'Love divine all loves excelling.' Because God in his very nature is love, and when he comes and dwells in our hearts the kind of community he creates is not just learning but loving.

Ok, but why are they a worshipping community? Why is God at the centre of their individual and community life, and not themselves? Because while sin brings death and bends us out of shape, the Spirit gives life. Look what Paul writes in Romans 6: 'Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, *we too might walk in newness of life*' (v1-4).

And when you're first converted, you're baptised by the Spirit into Christ. You're united with him. And his death becomes your death and his resurrection life becomes your life. And when you're baptised in water, it's an acting out of that, it's like you're put in a grave and lifted out again.

But that means, as Paul goes on to say, that because the old you has died with Christ, the power of sin in your life - its power to bend you out of shape, is broken. And now a new power is at work in you. The power of Jesus' life. Which means you will increasingly love and desire what he loves and desires. As the Spirit re-orders and re-forms what you most want.

And so rather than your freedom, or your happiness, or your security, or yourself being the ultimate in your life, God is. And the irony is, as the Spirit bends you back into shape you become freer and happier and more whole.

But fourthly, how come they're a proclaiming community? How come they're inviting and welcoming others in? You see, think how different that is from the way the world bends you out of shape. In his incredibly insightful essay on *The Inner Ring*, CS Lewis describes how we have this desire to be on the inside. In the Inner Ring of a group of friends, or a team, or the leadership of a church, or the board of a business. But at the same time, we want to keep others out, because it's the fact that being in the inner ring sets you apart from others, that makes it special. So you work to get in, and once in you fight to keep others out. But as Lewis points out, that desire for the Inner Ring bends you badly out of shape. As he says, "Of all the passions, the passion for the Inner Ring is most skilful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things."

But the kind of community the Holy Spirit creates is very different - because rather than trying to keep people out, they are bringing them in. As Jesus said to the disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses" (1:8).

You see, as the Spirit helps you see and learn all that Jesus has done for you, and as you experience his love for you, you can't keep it to yourself. And as a community they must have just been freely talking about Jesus and inviting their friends, because, Acts 2:47, 'the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.'

So if that's the kind of community the Spirit creates - learning, loving, worshipping, proclaiming - how do you get the Spirit?

The Greatest of Offers

It's really the question the crowd are asking. Luke tells us they were cut to the heart and asked the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter replies, "Repent and be baptised everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (2:38).

So if you're not yet a Christian, realise how your sin - in thought and word and deed - has bent you out of shape, by the things you should not have done but have done, and the things you should have done that you haven't. And confess them to God, and turn away from them.

And instead, turn towards Christ, and trust him. Trust him that at the cross he took all your sin upon himself, and he suffered and died in place of you, so that you can be forgiven. And when you do that for the first time, you can do it because God has given you the faith to believe and made your heart new by his Spirit. And as you do it, he fills you with his Spirit.

But remember, we don't just need saving from our sin, but from a crooked generation. So repent, believe, and get baptised in water as the public declaration that Jesus's death was your death, and his life is your life, and you're allegiance has changed. And you're leaving this bent out of shape world and joining the community of God's people.

And if you're already a Christian, *all of that* is already true of you. You already have the Spirit. But as Charles Spurgeon famously said, 'I leak'. Which is why Paul says in Ephesians 5:18 that we should 'be filled with the Spirit' - and go on being filled with the Spirit.

And be learning daily, by devoting yourself to the apostles' teaching in the word of God. Because the curved-in-on-itself world is constantly trying to catechise you, and make you conform to itself, so constantly be counter catechised by the Spirit, through his word.

Then, allow him to increase your love for his people. And just like in any relationship - the will comes before emotions. So choose to love, and find a place to serve, and give, and you'll find yourself loving and serving and giving and doing so with joy.

Then allow the Spirit to make you a worshipper of God. Don't resist him when he points out areas in your life that are out of shape, or out of line, or deformed, where you're loving other things like your reputation, or desire for adventure, or pleasure, or control, too much and they're becoming ultimate things for you. And instead, lean into those times when he is making Jesus seem wonderful to you, and let that truth penetrate your heart, open up to it, and let it bring forth worship.

And finally, listen to the promptings of the Spirit to tell others about Jesus or just invite them along to church. Because the great news about Pentecost is that the changing of hearts and the building of community is the Spirit's work, so we've got absolutely nothing to lose. If we make a hash of it, God still loves us, *and* he might just use it to draw people to him.

So, the world bends us out of shape, and makes us self-focused, self-centred, it kills community and leaves us increasingly lonely and isolated. But Jesus gave himself for us, and pours out his Spirit to make a very different community.