

What, Where, Who, Why, How?

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Read [Acts 2:1-13](#)



This should be an inspiring and uplifting passage. We should once again rejoice in the gift of the Holy Spirit, the one who continues to comfort, energise and inspire all who respond to the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit, the mysterious third of the Trinity that transforms us from sinner to saved and continues to transform us into the likeness of Christ if we would only let him. What great news for the Good News!

As we continue through the reading, we come across the amazing way that this Holy Spirit gave power to the testimony of the disciples, giving them the ability to convey their experience of Jesus Christ not just in many languages, but also with courage and conviction. Certainly, when I've read this in the past I realise the enormity of their efforts and the seeming impossibility of emulating such acts of evangelistic fervour in my own life.

And yet I am arrested at the very start of today's reading as we find the disciples doing what is for us an impossibility. Not in their speaking to the crowd, that comes much later; but rather in the very fact that they were all together in one place.

Not for us the joy of being together with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our Zoom gatherings are a

great stop-gap, but they cannot begin to replace or replicate the reality of sharing a room or a building. Though I have no problem with the Holy Spirit's ability to "fill the gap" that we are forced to endure for very good reasons, I am aware that it's a long time since I sat next to someone different in "church".

One of the great prayers I read recently online goes: *"For a time when we can see people with legs again, we pray, O God."* (seen on the Facebook page of the Christian humorous website Unvirtuous Abbey). It's a reminder that, as much as we might enjoy seeing each other's faces online, there's so much more to us than the 40 minutes or so that we can spend together on a Sunday morning. And that's not including those who are unable to join us.

So, there's the first hurdle with the passage. We have to get past the dissonance of distance, not just in terms of the length of time between the world of the text and today, but also of the space that there is between us. We cannot be "gathered in one place", but that's OK.

It's OK that we cannot be together because it is beyond our control, at the moment.

It's also OK that we're highly unlikely to go out for our unlimited exercise and meet with people from across the world and find that we can understand each other. But we can continue to play our part in getting the Good News of Jesus Christ across in terms that people understand.

We might not be in need of speaking in the many regional languages as described in verses 9 to 11 (a nightmare for anyone asked to read aloud in church), but we still need to understand the many cultures that there are around us and rely on the Holy Spirit to relate the gospel in those terms. Try listening (discreetly) to a conversation between two people on a subject that you know nothing about. It may well feel like they're speaking a foreign language. Sometimes you can follow the odd word, but even then it might not mean what you expect.

I remember spending a brief time confused at the beginning of my career in the hospital when people referred to the theatre. For a second, I thought that there was a thespian element to the hospital, which appealed to my own amateur dramatic background. Only when they went on to talk about anaesthetics and bone saws did I see the error in my understanding. Equally, ask me what DNA means, and I will immediately respond "Did Not Attend", the bane of the outpatient appointment world, not Deoxyribonucleic acid as researchers into family history and geneticists would know.

We've had to learn new language during this crisis as well. Phrases like "social distancing" and "contact tracing" may have existed in certain circles before this pandemic but are now becoming part of our common parlance. We also find that some of the words and phrases that were previously used have become redundant. We might want to suggest that there's no place anymore for that wonderful phrase "Fancy a pint?" or better still "I'll get this round", but there are many who hope that these will come back into fashion soon...

The Christian faith isn't immune to this evolution of language. Words that would be commonplace in previous generations are increasingly sounding archaic beyond (and even within) the boundaries of the church. Consider the Lord's Prayer. The traditional form of "trespass" was replaced in 1980 with the then more-accessible word "sin". We went from considering ourselves trespassers, like those who ignore the warnings to "Keep off the grass" to sinners. But now sin is deemed a difficult term to understand, particularly in our post-post-modern world where facts can be distorted and one person's rule is another person's exception.

It is noticeable that the current "Thy Kingdom Come" prayer initiative is using accessible as well as deeply theological language that the vast majority of people will still understand. Despite its abuses, there is still an understanding of *love*, so we focus on the unconditional nature that God has for humanity. Though we might sometime struggle to think of it of others, let alone ourselves, we are encouraged to understand

that we are *welcomed* into God's family. We have to say *sorry* but are reassured of God's *forgiveness*. And of course, we are reminded that none of this would be possible without the *life* and *death* of Jesus...

Though people might struggle with the faith-filled elements described here, at least concepts such as love, life and death are not beyond their understanding and experience, if not first-hand. And it is precisely this language of experience that we can speak of.

The disciples rushed out, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, to speak about their experience of walking with, running away from, and returning to Jesus. They spoke of how these encounters with Jesus made such a radical change to their lives, not just in their livelihoods but also in their attitudes. They spoke of not just who Jesus is for the whole of history, but also for them; this is the personal encounter with the global God.

This is also our story to tell; those who have discovered in our encounter with God, however that happened and however long it took, that He continues to welcome us in and is willing to forgive even before we say sorry. We can speak of the ways that God's love has been demonstrated, through those who share faith, or through the Bible. What words we use are up to us.

And actions may just speak louder than words...

Amen.

(Image by [Christopher Bernard](#) from [Pixabay](#))