

The main reading for Pentecost from Acts is a favourite of preachers given the wide variety of themes it covers – from the birthday of the church, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the importance of learning a modern language, to the appropriate time for the first drink of the day. It is however less popular with readers; many an unprepared person on the church rota has arrived at the lectern today with the challenge of pronouncing clearly the many native languages which the disciples are using to prophesy. The Holy Spirit gives them the ability to communicate with people in their own native languages, which they then use to prophesy about the wonders of God.

Jews are gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the day Moses received the law. They are described as being “amazed and perplexed”; showing perhaps the conflict between the need to be able to rationally explain events and a desire to faithfully experience what they are witnessing.

It seems then that conflict between faith and science goes back a long way in history. Our society certainly encourages us to look at events scientifically, as illustrated by the government’s insistence their approach to the Covid-19 pandemic is led by the science. Faith can be dismissed by some scientists as entirely irrational, irrelevant and a dangerous delusion. Communication, and the quest for explanation, can seem increasingly polarised between scientific atheism and religious belief.

In this context, it’s been interesting to read about the recent award of the Templeton Prize to Francis Collins. Francis Collins is an American geneticist and physician who led the Human Genome Project, is currently deeply involved in efforts to find a Covid-19 vaccine, and established a foundation to promote harmony between Christian faith and science. Collins himself sees God as “the greatest scientist”, and scientific discovery as both an opportunity for scientific excitement and an occasion for worship. He believes that belief in God can be a rational choice, and that the principles of faith are complementary to the principles of science. Collins focuses on encouraging greater dialogue, curiosity and humility among scientists and believers.

The Holy Spirit resting on the disciples brought about a profound change on this group. A short time previously, after Jesus’s crucifixion, they were scared and hiding fearfully from the world. Now they are proclaiming God’s glory to a wide group of people in their own languages. The birth of the church is the birth of outward communication of the faith by God’s people; that most uncomfortable word within the Church of England – evangelism.

This change has powerful lessons for us. The disciples’ gift of the Holy Spirit led them to reach out to people in ways that spoke to them directly to proclaim the wonders of God. This is our mission too - as the Holy Spirit communicates with us, we are to communicate our faith outwardly and to resist becoming an exclusive club focused on our own needs.

Francis Collins became a Christian as a student, but like many scientists stayed quiet about his faith early on, becoming more outspoken about his beliefs as his career grew. I remember how being told by a close colleague at work that they didn’t realise I was a Christian was a major turning point, that challenged me to consider the degree I was really living a Christian life. Communicating our faith is a team sport, and we all need help – from the Holy Spirit, and from our Church family with their different gifts, to live our faith outwardly in the world. We don’t have to face this challenge alone.

Our reading from Acts closes with Peter addressing the crowd and explaining the events that they have witnessed. Peter also explains why the disciples are prophesying their faith - so that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). When Francis Collins led a Harvard lecture series on faith and science, he was surprised to find the church packed with 600-700 students with a real hunger to understand how faith and science can be reconciled.

I believe that people have a real hunger for faith in today’s world - their quest for explanations can be met if we communicate our faith to people where they are, with the gifts we have been given, supported by the Holy Spirit and our Church family. **AMEN**