

Reflection

In the year 1632, an Italian astronomer by the name of Galileo published a scientific paper presenting his theory that contrary to the traditional belief, it was the earth which revolved around the sun, and not the other way around. This theory was a problem for the church at that time, for the church taught that God fixed the earth in place and not only the sun, but the whole cosmos orbited the earth.

Galileo was arrested and he faced the Inquisition charged with heresy. He was threatened with being burned at the stake unless he recanted of his views. By the end of the trial, he was forced to declare his theory to be false and erroneous, and so he escaped a death sentence. He remained under house arrest where he died 7 years later.

In this day and age, with the invention of more powerful telescopes and the advances in theoretical physics, we have quite a different understanding of our place in the universe. We now know that far from being the centre of the cosmos, the earth is a small planet in a galaxy that is only one of millions of galaxies, all of which are continually in movement. And indeed, the latest theories of an ever-expanding universe posit that there may not be such a thing as the centre of the universe.

Let's leave Galileo for a while and turn to our Acts reading. It was the festival of Pentecost and there were Jews gathered in Jerusalem from different places. You can almost sense the relish with which Luke lists all those far flung and exotic place names. It was his way of saying that there were people there from every single part of the known world. And every one of them heard their own language being spoken by the Galilean followers of Jesus. What could this mean?

Whether or not you take this story as literal and the followers of Jesus actually were suddenly able to speak all those foreign languages, the meaning of the story is clear. The followers of Jesus had a message that was for all people. Their message was not only for the Jews, but for all humanity. This was the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise Jesus had said before his ascension: "You will receive power when the Holy spirit comes upon you; and you will be witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." They were to be witnesses to the ends of the earth, to people of every cultural and language group.

Jesus was born into a culture that saw God as being their God. Their understanding was that God favoured the Jewish people against their enemies. But Jesus moved beyond the religious institutions of his time. Love your enemies he said. There is no 'them' and 'us'. There is only "us". The list of different languages named in today's reading is to indicate that God's love includes every nation, all of humanity.

But if we go a step further, with what we understand of the universe today, as shown in the video clip, we realise that humanity is not the centre of the universe. When we contemplate the immensity and complexity of all there is, the idea that God only cares for us is quite ludicrous. God created and loves the whole universe. To go back to the story of Galileo and the church of his day, what would we call thinking that places oneself in the centre of the universe? What would we call thinking that says "everything revolves around me"?

The Latin root of the word 'religion' is 'religare' which means 'to bind together or to hold together, to unite. When we make God to be 'our' God, when we say that God belongs only to us, we do the opposite of binding together. Instead we cause division, hatred and conflict. Not only that, we diminish God. We make him partisan and small, rather than universal and inclusive.

In 1992, 350 years after the event, Pope John Paul II finally conceded on behalf of the Catholic church that they had been 'mistaken' in their treatment of Galileo. Sometimes the church moves very slowly to keep up with changing knowledge and thinking.

Today, as we celebrate Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured down on the early church, let us ask the Spirit to help us to try to grasp who this God is whom we worship: Creator of the whole Universe, infinite, eternal and whose love is all-encompassing. And as followers of this God, let us also practise a love that is all-inclusive. Amen

Intercessory prayer

Living God,
at the beginning of time,
your spirit brooded over the earth
and breathed life into your creatures;
we pray for all creation,
for the well-being of this beautiful, endangered planet.
Wind of God; blow through your creation
and renew the face of the earth.
Holy Spirit, come, and in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

On the day of Pentecost you sent your Spirit
on the peoples of many nations:
we pray for the peoples of the world,
for all whose lives are destroyed
by poverty, war, disaster and disease.
Fire of God, come; warm our cold hearts
that we may burn with a passion for justice.
Holy Spirit, come, and in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Your Spirit overshadowed a young Jewish girl,
And Mary bore your love to the world:
We pray for those with whom we share our lives,
our families and friends,
those with whom we learn and work.
Breath of God, come; breathe on us
that we may be filled with your love
and bring your reconciling love to others.
Holy Spirit, come, and in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

By your Spirit, you empowered your disciples
to proclaim your gospel: we pray for your church,
and especially for our own ministers Geoff and Jeremy
and all who worship in this place.
Power of God, come; strengthen us to do your will
and confirm our desire to be your witnesses in the world.
Holy Spirit, come, and in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

By your Spirit, you inspired your disciples to go out
and bring healing and hope to your people;
we pray for all those who need your consolation,
for all who are destitute, lonely, bereaved or in pain,
And all those who care for them.

Comfort of God, come; soothe our pains and calm our fears,
that we may find our peace in you.
Holy Spirit, come, and in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Pentecost God,
visit us again this day;
speak to us in the language of our hearts
and pour out your Spirit upon us
that we may understand your word,
proclaim your works
and live forever in your presence
Holy Spirit, come, and in your mercy,
hear our prayer.