

## Divine Thermodynamics

### Cathedral Church of All Saints Wakefield

Pentecost Sunday May 11<sup>th</sup> 2008

How many of you here are scientists, I wonder? Even if you're not, you may have had to learn a bit at school. It all began to get difficult for me when you hit the *Second Law of Thermodynamics*. But for those of you who are as old as me, you may remember Michael Flanders and Donald Swann. They did a great song about the first and second laws of thermodynamics. It included the memorable lines:

'You can't pass heat from a cooler to a hotter –  
You can try it if you like but you far better notter,  
'Cos the cold in the cooler will get hotter as a ruler –  
'Cos the hotter body's heat will pass to the cooler.'

It was all about increasing chaos, about energy being dispersed. They were good on the first law too, but perhaps one lesson in science is enough for now! I remember too the patter that took them into that explanatory song. It began with C. P. Snow's Reith Lectures, which he called *The Two Cultures*. Flanders and Swann parodied his book, but kept the essence. The message is that our world is now so specialised, so fragmented, so compartmentalised that we cannot understand each other. So Flanders said: it's no good going up to a scientist and saying: 'How are you, lend us a quid etc....' They won't understand a word. Instead you must begin. 'Good morning, H<sub>2</sub> SO<sub>4</sub>, professor – and the reciprocal of  $\pi$  to your wife'. 'Ignore such a greeting', he said, 'and you'll receive a sharp *retort!*' That's an in-joke for chemical engineers!

So this is about increasing confusion, about a failure of language and communication. Such parody would not have worked if C.P.Snow hadn't slightly exaggerated the difficulties. After all, to an extent, we can all communicate with each other, although I have to admit that I always dread sitting next to the maths professors at university dinners. But Snow's basic point is right, and has indeed got worse. Even theologians do not always understand each other now for, within single disciplines, everything has become so specialised. There has been a knowledge explosion. So increasing chaos and confusion all round.

Now in case you think this is an entirely modern phenomenon, let me take you back to our first reading. It was, you'll remember about the gift of the Spirit. There was a bewildering babble with everyone speaking their own language. Indeed there is a story from the Old Testament which we often read at Pentecost – the story of the Tower of Babel. God, we are told, deliberately confused people by multiplying languages – it was a punishment for sin, for building the tower and trying to steal a God's eye view.

Where have we got to, then, since Babel, since the experience of the disciples at Pentecost, or indeed since the 1960s with C. P. Snow, Flanders and Swann and the two cultures? Does it say anything to us about God? Well, on the face of it, it all seems rather satisfactory. Now we live in a global village; there is globalisation, multi-national companies are in almost every country; the internet has connected us all together. No more confusion. Isn't it marvellous? Or is it?

Since 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe itself has fragmented frantically. The rise of nationalism goes on apace. Then despite the absence of global war, each of us could count depressingly large numbers of conflicts – in Palestine and Israel, in Sri Lanka and East Timor, in Zimbabwe and Somalia and so on ad almost infinitum. Or there is religion - one enormous fear is about the divisions between two vast cultures – Islam and Christianity. More chaos and confusion.

At the heart of the Pentecost story are two models. The story is almost an allegory about life with and life without God. Without God, human experience is like being submerged into countless languages, countless cultures, countless moral codes – again, there is increasing chaos and confusion. There is played out a dialogue of the deaf. People who are hard of hearing and wear hearing aids will tell you of the confusion of being in a large room full of people. Nothing is clear. But Pentecost offers a model where everyone can understand each other, even when speaking in their own language. At the heart of the Christian story then, at the heart of the Christian faith, lies a radical integration, calling us together. God calls us into one while celebrating our infinite diversity. If this is so, is there a message for us now?

It could hardly be clearer and it could hardly be nearer. In seven or eight weeks time bishops from across the world will meet at Canterbury for the Lambeth Conference. Will they, so to speak, hear each other in their own language or will they try to speak so firmly that they drown out all other noise? Some have already decided. They are not coming – they don't want to hear. And none of this is as far away as it seems. Versions of such a dialogue of the deaf can happen in our own Church of England, in our own diocese, in our own congregation. We don't want to hear about gays, about other religions, about polygamy in Africa, about countless other things. Let Babel reign. Let's shut our ears.

It is difficult to comprehend such blindness to the gospel. Today's feast is the most urgent for us in all the Christian calendar. For the pouring out of the Spirit makes and transforms us. It does so by forming us in God's image and God cannot be fragmented and divided. Shall we open ourselves to that Spirit, shall we be ready to live *Transforming Lives*? Moses said I offer two choices this day – life and good, death and evil; life and death, blessing and curse. So that you and your descendants may prosper – choose *life, receive the Holy Spirit* of God in Christ Jesus.

Amen

#### READINGS

Acts 2: 1-21

John 20: 19-23