

The Feast of Pentecost

St George's Anglican Church Malvern Sunday 23rd May 2010

“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

Joel. 2.28; ACTS 2.v 17-18

The Easter season concludes on the 50th day which is the Feast of Pentecost. We understand well enough that it is about the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church with fire. It is usually associated with that ecstatic gathering recorded in the 2nd Chapter of Acts of the Apostles when they were all together in one place and experienced the sound of the rushing mighty wind and cloven tongues of fire over their heads as they began to speak in other tongues.

These days the preacher usually feels compelled to go further back in time so as to identify the great religious themes for our understanding from which the feast of Pentecost comes. I am sure you will have heard all of this many times before but we need to rehearse them over and over again in order to grasp firmly their development of meaning in order to see their purpose for us today and in every age and generation.

In early agricultural times in Palestine on the 50th day after the Feast of the Passover the people celebrated the Feast of Weeks at the in gathering of the grain harvest, giving thanks that God had richly blessed them with the fruits of the earth and the source of their physical well-being for the coming year. Without grain there would be no bread and bread was the staff of life.

As Judaism formally developed over the centuries, the feast also marked the history of Israel's salvation when the people celebrated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt Sinai and the establishment of Yahweh's covenant with Israel as the people of God. Thus the gathering of the harvest and the giving of the Law were carried over into the Christian Feast called Pentecost, a Greek word which marked the climax of the great 50 days of Easter.

So it was that the grain harvest and the Law of Israel were radically replaced by the gift of the Spirit and the Old Israel was reconstituted and replaced by the New Israel. So the Feast of the Law becomes the Feast of the Spirit. Is Pentecost then to be regarded as the birthday of the Church as many have suggested? I don't think so, because the event draws for its meaning on important activities in the life of the people of God over hundreds of years. The old Israel must therefore be seen as the forerunner to the new, just as Jesus Christ Himself comes as Messiah and mediator of the new Covenant with the new Israel of God. It is because the two things are so inextricably woven together that we cannot countenance the idea of a sharp break between the two, even as the Old and the New Testaments are bound together in the Canon of Scripture. The early Fathers of the Church clearly saw that the present and the future could not be understood without knowledge of what had gone before in the History of Salvation.

In our time, the re-establishment of dialogue between Christians and Jews has been a source of great enrichment, primarily because it is a necessary thing to do in healing our sad divisions, but also for Christians, the reminder that we cannot understand the New Testament record of the good News without an understanding of the history of Israel itself.

Coming back to the first Pentecost, it is very clear that it was about the release of the Holy Spirit of God upon Jesus' followers at the time of His resurrection and physical departure from them. Yet the New Testament is not clear or even in agreement that this happened only at one time and in one place. In that matter for example St John and St Luke do not agree, with John describing the gift of the Spirit as occurring on Easter Night and Luke on the 50th day of Easter.

Each of them had theological reasons for embedding their account in a different event but their main concern was not about anchoring that event in a precise historical time or geographical place. For them and indeed for all the writers of the New Testament, the giving of the Holy Spirit to the Church is the outcome of the Risen Christ, not in a single event, but through many outpourings of the Spirit at different times and places.

These days, as in many other times over the past 2,000 years, people tend to think of “the Church” in institutional and legal terms seeing it solely as a body controlling the life of people and at times stifling individual initiative. No doubt there are countless examples of where this has happened and it still happens today, but equally there are countless historical examples of where the Church has been renewed through the work of the Holy Spirit and the agency of charismatic figures like St Francis and The Wesley’s who we celebrate next week. This is why it is so important to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost as it should be celebrated, by thanking God for the gifts of the Spirit, for embracing and then expressing those gifts in our lives and by allowing that new life to be released in the Body of Christ the Church.

The way in which the Spirit is released and people’s lives are transformed is always going to vary in forms that range from expressions of Spiritual ecstasy through to a quiet determination to leave oneself open to the promptings of the Spirit and to go wherever it might lead us. I am presently involved with a small group of mostly Pentecostal Christians in the city known as “Destineers” who meet to consider what Leadership means for the Christian in public life. Our theologies are very different, we come from different ethnic and spiritual traditions and yet I am impressed by their energy, simple faith and their desire to give themselves to Christ in proclaiming the good news. From time to time we talk about what is happening in their local congregations and they all seem to be involved in “growing” new Churches at a great rate and in a way that might make those of us in mainstream Churches feel envious! Their model comes from aspects of the early Apostolic Church which operated under minimal structures and which was concerned to proclaim good news to those who had not previously heard it. In the first century the Christian movement spread like wild fire across the Greco-Roman world and in some ways it is doing the same today, especially in the developing world but also in places like secular humanist Australia.

I am frequently reminded about our Lord’s teaching about the new wine bursting the old wine skins because it was clear that He and His followers could foresee a problem with the old legalistic religious forms simply not being able to contain the new wine of the Spirit. So it happened that the new Christian Faith, the followers of the way of Christ,

burst out of Judaism, leaving the Synagogue and Temple, to meet in one another's homes and wherever else they may be accepted, for the purposes of Liturgy, Instruction and Mission.

Throughout history there has always been a tension between Law and Spirit, Institution and Movement, Faith and Works, Tradition and Enthusiasm, Routine and Charisma and as we would put it today, Religion and Spirituality. The challenge in every day and age is to recognise these differences, to mutually respect both of them and to acknowledge that you cannot have the one without the other. I love to tell the story of a dialogue that took place in St Paul's Cathedral between myself and a Buddhist Rimpuche, a disciple of the Dali Lama. One of the young Buddhists in the audience declared how important spirituality was while rejecting the role of Religion. My brother Rimpuche offered a perfect answer when he picked up a glass and poured water into it. Saying "here is glass and here is water, glass without water is an empty shell and water without glass goes everywhere and is lost". I then lent over to him and said: "Your Holiness, far better that you said that than me, because they are more likely to believe you than me as an Archbishop".

All of this is a reminder to us today that we live in a world of fashion, fabrication and fragmentation, seldom realising that we live our lives on the basis of half truths and small fragments of knowledge. One of the things about the ageing process is the awful realisation of how much there is that we don't know and how partial and segmented our own knowledge is. In addition, intellectuals of the post enlightenment period on every conceivable level have dismantled the paradigms or structures of meaning which had held together the belief systems and moral frameworks by which our ancestors found meaning and purpose. No wonder many people despair of finding any meaning in life in these times of discord and conflict, where everything of substance is to be challenged.

In order to respond to these challenges of post modernity, not to mention meeting the challenges of their survival, the Christian Churches of today must take hold of the essential truth of the good news of Jesus Christ. This means we must open ourselves up to the movement of the Holy Spirit and create structures appropriate to our mission. The clue to doing

this lies in the rediscovery that faith and works, spirit and form, love and law, and most other human structures accept the idea of paradox, knowing that wholeness of life has to be spirit filled and also given proper form, in community, in order to maintain the dynamic of spiritual renewal as well as being grounded in a living tradition. After all, there is nothing wrong with tradition provided that it is a living, growing, enriching process just as there is nothing wrong with institutional structure provided it allows us to live, move and have our being in ways that are led by the spirit.

The Feast of Pentecost is both a time of ingathering and of release, of drawing to ourselves the riches of the tradition we have received, and of allowing ourselves to be released by the Holy Spirit of God who may lead us into all sorts of new and unexpected places as together we are being renewed through that self same spirit.

True out temporal future may presently look uncertain. To return to the two examples I gave of containers; regarding wine and wineskins, water and the glass it may be the old wineskins or religious vessels may be cracking and need reinforcement or restructuring, yet Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit will teach us everything we need to know and that our hearts should not be troubled by such things.

Ezekiel reminds us in the opening sentence of the Eucharist “A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you, I will put my spirit within you and you shall live”. As Paul says to the Romans, “As heirs of these promises, as Children of God, “if we suffer we do so with Christ in order that we may also be glorified with Him”.

Amen