



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Pentecost

readings: [Acts 2 1-21](#); [1 Corinthians 12 3\(b\)-13](#); [John 20 19-23](#)

28 May 2023

“Life begins at 40”, so they say. Although it is almost half a lifetime ago since I was aged 40, today is my 40th anniversary! For it was 40 years ago, on this day of Pentecost in 1983 and in this very place, that I ceased to be a sadly lapsed Methodist and was confirmed. My new life in Christ began here: a new life which led from being a member of the Cathedral congregation, to Lay Reader, to ordained priest and then a Cathedral Chaplain here. God moves in a mysterious way. So we meet today to celebrate: to celebrate Pentecost, to celebrate New Life, not just for me, not just for the disciples, but for all God’s people.

Pentecost has been described as a pregnant moment in the life of the people of God. More accurately, it is more the end of the pregnancy and the moment of birth: it is the time when gestation ceases and new life begins. It is both an end and a beginning: a leaving behind of that which is past, that which has been laboriously carried to term, and a launching forth with joy into that which is now beginning to be.

Pentecost is a time of celebration of new life in the Spirit. But it is not a time of completion. Rather it is a time of moving on, of moving forward into new dimensions, into a time of inexpressible, ineffable change. The Day of Resurrection (50 days ago) has changed into the Day of Transformation. And that day, the Day of Pentecost has come.

So if I wanted a somewhat belatedly-announced text, it could be the opening words of our reading from the Acts of the Apostles: “when the Day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place”. But somewhat uncharacteristically, I prefer the wording from the King James Version of the Bible: “When the Day of Pentecost was *fully* come...” because that implies that such a transforming change wasn’t instant, and recognises that real change takes time, that the seemingly impossible takes a little longer.

In a nutshell, Pentecost is about *Change*: change for the disciples, change for the infant church, change for you and me as members of the church today. All Change!

The psychologist Kurt Lewin identified a model of change based on 3 stages: *frozen, unfrozen, re-frozen*. He suggested that institutions and their people are often frozen into glacier-like fixed structures capable of only infinitesimally slow progress, until they are unfrozen by unsettling and often unexpected factors creating turbulence, before the new structure can be refrozen and accepted as being ‘the new normal’.

Metaphorical elements of Wind and Fire, elements which speak of forcefulness, unexpectedness, inability to control; these are turbulent elements which disrupt or destroy the prevailing structures, which unfreeze the old order and make it yield place to new. It is not surprising that Luke deploys these metaphors of wind and fire to describe the indescribable coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.

“When the Day of Pentecost had come; they were all together in one place”. Or again, rather better from the King James Version: “they were all *with one accord* in one place”. We could take this literally, meaning ‘they were all together as a group’ but the words “with one accord” give it a wider meaning that, spiritually, here were many individual Christians working together harmoniously, ‘singing from the same hymn sheet’ if you will, an attitude which would characterise the early church and sustain it in its growth, and one which we desperately need to retain today. For Pentecost is not just about Change; it is also about *Inclusion*.

No-one is excluded from this display of God’s grace at Pentecost. This is not the Transfiguration on the mountain top, witnessed by only the inner circle of disciples. Everyone is included in Pentecost: the tongues of fire rest on each one of the disciples; each one of the crowd hears them speak to them in their own

native language. Pentecost is not an inner mystical experience; it is an external outpouring of God's energy to touch every life present and willing to receive it.

Yes, just as when confronted by the challenge of change that Pentecost brings, there would be many who would mourn the loss of traditional ways of doing things, who would be perturbed by disturbance to their equilibrium from 'the shock of the new', and who would grieve for the certainties of the past and be depressed by the prospect of a different future.... so there would be those in denial of what they were seeing, unwilling to believe the freshness of God's initiatives, some perplexed in their disbelief, others cynically taking refuge in mockery: "they are filled with new wine", confusing exuberant Spirit-induced joy with alcohol-induced early morning inebriation.

Yet here is inclusivity for all. Here is universal, unmerited, irresistible new life. Here is the gift of the Spirit to reanimate disciples who had seemed defeated, to impel into new directions all that had become stale and formulaic, to include those who mourn the loss of times past or mock the evidence of their own eyes that here is the Spirit invading human lives in ways that shatter old expectations. Here is the Spirit that fulfils the transformed and recontextualised words of the ancient prophecy of Joel that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved".

And now at Pentecost the promised time has come, with wind and fire: Breath of the Spirit, filling them with new life; Wind of the Spirit blowing them out to do the Lord's work; Fire of the Spirit, warming and rekindling their hope; Flame of the Spirit, burning all before it, transforming their lives. This is the infant church enthused and empowered, engaged and energised.

Yes, some of those who heard them said they must be drunk...and perhaps they were, drunk not on new wine but on new life, not on spirits but on the Holy Spirit. Certainly they did mad things: speaking to all and sundry no matter what their language, preaching powerfully and persuasively in the public square. Here were no inhibitions, no hesitations or deviations. No pause to debate theology amongst themselves, or set up consultation exercises or agree outreach strategies, they simply went out to preach Christ crucified and risen...the living Lord who could transform lives.

This is not an apologetic church, not a defensive church: it is a church intoxicated, intoxicated with divine madness to preach persuasively the madness of a Messiah crucified and risen, to speak succinctly of a Saviour come as a suffering servant. No matter how apparently mad, their message spoke to the basic needs of the world; it spoke of life and death, failing and forgiveness, suffering and hope. It promised transformation: take Christ into your life and he will change it; he will give you the Holy Spirit to cleanse, invigorate and renew, to warm and burn and sweep away.

We, the present Church, God's Pentecost People today...what are we doing? Are we ready to continue to receive again the Spirit promised by Christ after his Resurrection? Are we ready for the mad mission to which he calls us? Are we ready for his promises to be fulfilled through us? Are we ready for him to come into our lives with rushing wind and burning fire? Or ready to respond to that quiet but insistent prompting of the Spirit that refuses to go away?

Are we ready to embrace a future where directed by the Spirit we don't need to cautiously thumb through a rule book to determine how we ought to act; where powered by the Spirit we can lay aside our fear of the other and delight in difference; where cleansed by the Spirit we can have a new sense of kinship with the natural world; where prompted by the Spirit, we can grow to realise and release our full God-given potential; where we can be content in ourselves and can enjoy being ourselves and be prepared to let others be themselves too.

And where we can all join together in that great dance and drama of God's new creation, that new life into which, in the Spirit, we are all called today.

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