

Pentecost – 15th May 16

Readings: Acts 2: 1-21, Psalm 104: 26-36, Romans 8: 14-17, John 14: 8-17

God comes to us in so many different ways. People feel God's presence in a beautiful place, or in quiet moments of prayer, or in all the power and volume of a well - known anthem or song sung at full blast, or in a sudden flash, or a growing realisation, or in a simple, kindly act of love. Some of these special moments are so clear when they happen to us, but difficult to describe to others. Sometimes we see things through the eyes of faith - a rainbow for example reminds us of God's covenants. Psalm 104 affirms the Spirit in creation. The Psalmist is inspired by creation in all its beauty and diversity, but more than that all creatures embody God's wisdom in the pleasure they experience and give us in flying or swimming around, or feeding or just kind of hanging out. God's creative spirit gives life, breath, and energy to all creation. Filled with this vision of divine playfulness, the Psalmist is filled with joy and delight. When Libbie and I lived in the Rectory at Caloundra we could look down over Kings Beach and out to the ocean and in the season, see whales sporting in the deep. In my first parish of West Mackay, we would often, when the cane harvest or the crush was on, take visitors to see cane fires. The great tongues of flame would flare up, move across the cane being burnt and then die away. I always thought of Pentecost when I saw them. Today's Feast of Pentecost celebrates a revelation of God's power. Seemingly simple - tongues of fire descended on the first Christians and they went out and preached the Gospel in a number of languages - but very difficult to describe. If we look carefully, Luke, in writing the Acts of the Apostles says it was "like" tongues of fire. It reminds me of other passages of scripture, such as Ezekiel struggling to describe his vision of God¹, or St. John, writing his revelation from which we've been reading in the past month uses the word "like"² as he, too, struggles to find words to describe the beauty, and the power and the significance of what he has seen in his visions.

In the picture in the Acts of the Apostles that St. Luke describes for us, he too tries to find an image to define what happened and its significance. Jesus followers are without hope. They are behind locked doors, dispirited and fearful. They've no idea what they're going to do next. They have lost their leader and have lost their way. As John tells us in the Gospel this morning, Jesus has promised that when he leaves them, the advocate, or the counsellor, or the comforter will come to them.³ Suddenly they begin to experience something new and different - the life giving breath and power of God. They feel a new sense of direction and purpose. They have a new understanding. They have a new energy. They are compelled to go out into the world and tell the good news of the mercy and love of God. Jesus, in St. John's account in Chapter 15 of his gospel is specific that the disciples will continue his work, but they won't do it alone. The Spirit of God will testify with them.⁴ They become a community of faith once more - transformed from a group of fearful individuals. They begin to proclaim the faith fearlessly, and in a way that resonates with the people's culture and spirituality. They go out to the streets, sharing good news, speaking in unfamiliar voices and being heard across culture and ethnicity. Everyone gets the message. Diversity is no longer an impediment to unity but is the vehicle for the Spirit's movement. The new understanding encompasses everyone. The spirit fills the entire world without obliterating particular identity -

¹ Ezekiel 1:5 for example

² Revelation 4:3 is an example

³ John 14:26

⁴ John 15:26

different languages and cultures and peoples are intentionally named - the spirit respects the diversity of language and culture. Peter's quotation from Joel emphasizes the pervasiveness of the Spirit, irrespective of age, gender, or socio-economic status.

The Feast of Pentecost was initially a celebration of the fruits of the earth, fifty days after Passover. Farmers gave thanks to God for the first fruits of their harvest, given by God to sustain the people. The early church adopted the occasion to give thanks for the first fruits of the Spirit. St. Paul explains to the church at Corinth that the fruits or gifts of the spirit are at the very heart of the church, and are an expression of the breath of God working through different personalities. Further in Galatians, Paul lists the fruits of the Spirit⁵. (Read Gal 5:22) We are all one body, the body of Christ, but the Spirit works in a different way in each of us. And we come together to share and to give thanks for those gifts and skills and to build each other up, and to build the whole community of faith. But there is a much wider context as well - Paul in Chapter 8 of his letter to the Romans sets our human longings and desires against an enormously broad canvas - so broad we can hardly imagine it - but our human experience of the Spirit is set against the canvas of the whole creation. There is a danger sometimes of a certain human arrogance that the Spirit is just for us – but it fills all creation. “Praise the Spirit in creation, breath of life, God's origin”⁶ begins one of the Pentecost hymns.

As we hear Pentecost described in the reading from Acts it's maybe tempting to think, well.... We haven't felt the rush of a mighty wind or seen amazing things here and to wonder how we measure up in our community of faith. But we are unique, as they were, and the spirit comes to us in different ways - just like the wind which blows where it will as Jesus reminds us in his conversation with Nicodemus which St. John records in Chapter 3 of his gospel.⁷ We might have already felt the breath of God; it's just that we don't always call it a Pentecost, or charismatic experience. The evangelists use images like tongues of fire, or a mighty wind to describe these transforming experiences. But as we know, some things cannot be fully captured by words. Perhaps you can recall moments when you felt supported, or different in some way, or transformed, and were able to give thanks for the indwelling of the Spirit.

And the Spirit does work. When in the name of Christ, we work for peace and reconciliation - in the home or workplace or community, we are moving in the Spirit. When we take the time to be there for someone unfamiliar in our midst, we are moving in the Spirit. When we speak a word of compassion, or are moved to an act of compassion for someone who is suffering, we are moving in the Spirit. When we hear a word of love or reconciliation spoken by someone we have hurt, the Spirit is working to make the gift of forgiveness a reality. Next Thursday I will be attending the Annual Roman Catholic-Anglican Clergy Day. In today's pew bulletin there's a note from members of St. Saviour's Laidley with an invitation to some sessions on “growing your Church” and I hope people from here can attend. When we gather with others in a spirit of unity, we are moving in the Spirit. It is the unseen breath of God that keeps on working, blowing, leading us all into new understanding.

⁵ Galatians 5:22ff – the fruits of the Spirit are set against the works of the flesh in Gal 5:19-20

⁶ TIS 415

⁷ John 3:8

If we say that Pentecost is the disciple's experience of a new understanding bursting forth in them in the days following Jesus death and resurrection, what was the nature of the new understanding? It was that Jesus was somehow still alive and with them. They no longer had a direct experience of Jesus, but they felt him as close as if he were alive in their being. They felt that everything he'd taught didn't suddenly become meaningless, but was still worth giving one's life to. They knew that one way to keep Jesus alive to generations who never met him was to witness to his life and ministry. And that one way to talk about all of this was in the imagery of a spirit that fills us, lights us, moves through us, urges us onward and takes us to new worlds of understanding on the wings of a dove – or, if you've been to West Moreton Anglican College, a corella.

And if we listen carefully to the story of Pentecost, we will see something more than tongues of flame lighting upon a group of people in Galilee almost two thousand years ago. We will see the reach of the story through time all the way to us in the concern of the disciples that this remarkable story be shared, that it continue as a living experience long past the lives of the disciples themselves. We will know and feel that God does not want us to play small or be subservient. We won't bow down as slaves but stand up as friends of God and heirs⁸ who can make great plans and then seek to bring them to birth. "Greater things" are possible for us when we "ask in Jesus' name" and in alignment with God's purposes. We will know that we are not alone in our quest for abundant life – this is the quest of God for all creation and we can become messengers and manifestations of God's creative love. We will understand that while God's Spirit is universal and everlasting, energizing all life, human and non-human, Jesus promises his followers that they can experience the same Wisdom and energy that brings worlds into being. We will be enabled and empowered to partake in the same wisdom and energy that characterized Jesus' ministry. In so doing, we will know that we can face challenge and change and resistance with courage and steadfastness, and that will be amazing to us and the world.⁹

⁸ Romans 8: 15-17

⁹ Part of this last paragraph from Dr. Bruce Epperly in "The Adventurous Lectionary – Pentecost" at www.patheos.com