

St Columba 23 May 2010

Pentecost

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Acts 2: 1-21

A. Children's Time

Happy birthday to us, Happy birthday to us, Happy birthday dear Church, happy birthday to us!

This is not Jesus' birthday but it is often spoken of as the birthday of the church! **WHY?**

It is the celebration of the day we identify as the day the Spirit of God, promised by Jesus, arrived amongst a great mixed crowd who were gathered and listening to Peter and the other followers of Jesus. In this event we are told that people heard the message of God's love in their own tongue! Everyone who was there, young old, male female, Jew, non-Jew, gay and straight heard how they were included in this all embracing love of God. The event happened 50 days after Easter.

It was the beginning of something new.

- Jesus was gone – they were on their own
- He promised comfort and help to his close friends
- He left his friends with a challenge – to share what he had taught them

On this 50th day after Easter all this falls into place for his disciples.

They start the day shut away together in an upstairs room – I guess talking about their friend Jesus, and how they were all getting on after the strangeness of Easter. Perhaps they were wondering what was going to happen to the struggle to help the poor and those on the margins of their community that they had begun with Jesus: Wondering how they were going to continue to learn about the God who loved them and wanted them to live well loving God back.

Jesus had previously tried to reassure them that they would find strength and help after he was dead. He said he would send the Holy Spirit, the helper to them.

- In their culture the word for spirit and wind is the same! So when they heard the loud sound of the wind rushing through the doors and windows of the room they were convinced it was this Holy Spirit, this helper Jesus had promised to send them.
- In their culture sounds from the sky, from heaven, were thought to be the voice of God – that could be in thunder or the rushing sound of a strong wind like this one.

So this story, told to us by Luke, is one in which his friends experience the promise being kept!

B.

But not only are we told they heard things that they interpreted to be

from God, they saw things!

- They saw '*tongues, as of fire*' notice the words carefully 'as of fire'

In other words they saw red and deep orange colours which researchers suggest to us, that by Luke noting of the colour of the tongues he could be signifying the depth of a trance this group were in!

Again two images: *tongues and fire*.

We have noted one of the significant aspects of the fire image – the colour, red, also the colour of blood. Fire is also the energy source that transforms all that come within its power.

And the tongues? Well, the followers who had been gathered in that room spilled out into the street and at the sound of the strong violent wind people who were gathering in Jerusalem for the harvest festival gathered to see what was going on. These people came from many different place and many different cultures and spoke many different languages. We need tongues to speak!

All were able to hear and understand what was being said as if they were being spoken to in their own language!

So what does this story with its signs and confusion mean for us?

We too could write it off and say they were all strange and bewildered, and we should not spend too much time on the story – their own contemporaries said they were drunk!

But others were perplexed and asked “what does this mean?”
I think this is the question we need to ask.

Peter quickly gets to his feet at the accusation he and his friends are drunk! He leaps to defend, or explain what is going on.

Do you know the phrase “vision statement”? Lots of companies and businesses have them these days and they tell us that these organisations are forward looking, working to improve things; to get better at this or that as they move into the future. A vision statement can motivate a group, inspire them to take action, to do something. This is what Peter points to. A very old vision statement.

Peter, according to Luke, references his interpretation of these strange events to the prophet Joel of First Testament. He recites Joe’s vision statement for a time when God is at work in the world saving the people....

“I will pour my spirit upon all flesh
Your sons and daughters shall prophesy
Your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream
dreams
Even upon my slaves, both men and women ... will I pour out
my spirit
And I will show portents....and signs on earth and the heaven
above.” Acts 2:17-21

This is a statement that envisions and dreams of a world that is filled with the presence of God, healed, restored, set free: ('saved' is Church-speak for this). This is the vision Joel paints for us; a picture of God rescuing, or saving, Israel from disaster.

This is the ministry of Jesus and the work of God that is presented to us over and over in so many different ways in the biblical literature.

This is what the commissioning of the disciples and the sending them out in to all the world is for: to heal, restore and set free – and to invite those who catch the vision, who dream the dream to say yes to and participate in the work of justice making love.

There is no distinction as to who is included in these acts of justice - making love that were taught about by Jesus; and lived out by him in his life. Jesus was modelling for us ways of healing restoring and setting free. In our time the call to us to set people free; to heal and restore. In this work we have the transforming power of the Holy spirit to inspire us.

For us this work brings into focus what we offer to our young people as the way to find happiness - that is not through alcohol or drugs. It is modelling relationships that demonstrate respect not violence and abuse

It is valuing and honouring the efforts of others to participate in making our world a good place to live.

It is in being kind, it is in caring enough to challenge and question.

So here we are, declaring to the world which watches us that we are in continuity with that first Pentecost outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the 'empowerer' that energises and transforms. We are part of the Church, the organisation that through history has provided inspiration and continuity for those who would follow Jesus. To be true to the vision in our day we must commit ourselves daily to seeing the places where healing, restoration and freedom are needed, and then acting accordingly.

We who have caught the vision of the Spirit of God now have the responsibility to let it lose amongst our people, in our time, leaving no-one out.