

Sunday 4th June, 2017 - Day of Pentecost
Year A
Acts 17: 22-31
Psalm 66:7-19
1 Peter 3:8-22
John 14:15-21

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Our Archbishop has produced and released a short video statement for today's feast. In it, he implored us to "Come and hear the wonders of God".

He reflected on the fact that although Christians across the world speak many languages today, it wasn't always the case. In the early days of the faith the gospel had yet to reach all corners of the globe. Then, on the first Pentecost after Jesus was crucified, came one of history's most extraordinary moments.

As we hear this morning in Acts chapter 2, followers of Jesus were gathered when suddenly there was the sound of the rush of a mighty wind and the appearance of tongues of fire resting on people's heads. The people were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages.

Travelers to Jerusalem from many nations were astounded to hear the gospel - "the wonders of God", as Luke puts it - proclaimed in their own languages.

"What does this mean?" asked the bewildered crowd who gathered on hearing the commotion. Peter rose with the other apostles and gave one of the great sermons of all time. He told them that what they were seeing was the fulfilment of prophecy about the last days and about salvation for all who call on the name of the Lord Jesus. And he went on to explain the gospel, how Jesus was put to death on the Cross as part of God's salvation and how death could not hold him.

He told the gathered crowd that the promise of the Holy Spirit was for them, and for all humanity - how God wished for all the world to know the wonders of the Gospel. More than 3000 people became Christians that day, and had their lives transformed. They entered into the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. A mighty and marvelous miracle, indeed.

Of course, the reading from Acts is not the only reference that we have today to the giving of the Holy Spirit. And I think it is important that we recognize this. In the Gospel passage just read, Jesus says to his disciples, "Peace be with you". Then, he breathes on them and says: "Receive the Holy Spirit". They were there. Another Pentecost moment - John's version of Pentecost, we might say.

It's a very different context, it's a very different description, but it is no less important in our thinking about Pentecost, and the Spirit whose Feast we celebrate today. There is a commission, and there is empowerment as well. The disciples are sent - they are given authority. And they are promised that they will not be alone. Breath - life - power. That is the gift that Jesus gives the disciples. They have received the call to go. They know they don't go alone. And their mission, it would seem, is rooted in the message of forgiveness. Jesus tells them that if they forgive sins, they are forgiven. If they retain them then forgiveness is not given.

Why do I think this version of the giving of the Spirit is so important? Well, while not wanting to downplay the description from Acts, my experience is that the coming of the Spirit as described in John is in fact far more common than the dramatic, once-for-all account of that first Pentecost. Yes, it happens - I know. For some people that is their experience of hearing and understanding, and saying yes. Like a thunderbolt. Like a flame of fire.

But for most of us, it's not like that. Most of us don't have a dramatic story of revelation or conversion. Rather our understanding and faith grows more slowly, even if it came from a formative incident or experience. In that sense, then, we need the breath of the Holy Spirit, given by Jesus to keep us alive as we go on searching, refining our faith.

Breath is needed for life - as demonstrated in the Genesis account of Creation and the Ezekiel story of new creation (Ezekiel 37:3-5). There seems to be here in our Gospel, a symbolic representation of the life-breath that God provided the first creation and the recreation of the people of God is now once again enlivening a new creation -- a new community.

The Christian journey is long... and this paschal mystery of death to life which we have just celebrated over the past seven weeks repeats in an ever deepening spiral throughout our years. Today's promise is simple... the Spirit of power will come... to those who dare open themselves to the journey... and who are willing to stay with it, for as long as is necessary.

In all of this, of course, we declare our wonder and excitement that the same Holy Spirit that was given by Jesus to his disciples, and which descended on the worshippers in Jerusalem nearly 2000 years ago is still energising and blessing believers. The same Holy Spirit is at work now, amongst us and all Christians enabling us to tell people about the unchanging wonders of God.

And so, we celebrate the gift given to us, of the Holy Spirit. And we call upon the Holy Spirit to bring peace to our broken world. We trust the Holy Spirit to stir us to prophesy when we witness injustices. We trust the Holy Spirit to inspire each and every one of our members to live into and embody their Spirit-given gifts.

We trust in and celebrate the many and varied ways the Spirit works in our lives, especially the ways in which she manages to know just what we need individually and communally and when.

However we experience the Spirit, then, we are reminded by our Archbishop of our commission - to go out, filled by this Spirit, and proclaim to all that we meet and know - “Come! Come and hear the wonders of God.”

In the name of God, Amen.