

## Pentecost 2020

During a recent theology online session hosted by Christ Church we touched on Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead, which caused some flurry by remarks made and observations shared. I won't recall the minutiae of the conversation, but one position taken can be summed up as "something must have happened" to turn a bunch of scared followers headed by the disciples into bold witnesses to the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus and much more. I mention this exchange and one aspect of its outcome for a particular reason: "something must have happened" usually overlooks or fails to mention the Feast of Pentecost: the lavishing of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and others, women and men, who are gathered physically in one place together.

The story that we are committed to does not conclude with Jesus' resurrection. Ten days ago we celebrated Jesus' ascension, his being taken up on high, and today we celebrate a sequential event: 120 persons were filled with the Spirit. They were brimming with the Spirit. It led onlookers to ask if they were drunk. Peter replies by referencing the prophecy of Joel telling the large company who have gathered that what Joel prophesied is now taking place - the infusion of power from on high. Peter goes on to preach a stirring sermon witnessing to Jesus as Lord and Messiah calling on his listeners to repent and be baptised - to be filled with the Holy Spirit. On that day according to Acts 3000 accepted Jesus as Lord and Messiah.

This morning I want to look ahead for a moment to Peter's sermon as it develops after he directs the crowds to Joel's prophecy, which I would urge us all to make our reading for this week. (Acts 2.22-38) In the sermon Peter speaks of how God has raised Jesus, freeing him from death, because as Peter says, "it was impossible for him to be held in [death's] power." (Acts 2.24) Paul elsewhere calls death the final enemy. (1 Corinthians 15:26) And in Paul's theology death has been vanquished. Jesus is the sign. No sign will be given to you except the sign of Jonah. (Luke 11.29) Peter continues referencing King David quoting him and going on to point out that David's tomb is still with them. David is not risen. Jesus is someone greater than David. Jesus is the sign. He is the life. Peter points out that what David spoke of, what he hoped for, what he foresaw has come true saying, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses."

In Luke's Gospel we read that Jesus opened the Scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus warming their hearts. Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost is a clue to what Jesus opened up to them as he came alongside them on the way. Firstly, the prophecy of Joel, as well as the Davidic covenant. For Peter King David witnesses to Jesus. Peter's sermon is heading in one direction as he declares, "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2.36) The Spirit of God that has filled Peter leads him to declare that the one who has been crucified and has been raised and carried up is Lord and Messiah.

In Luke's account of the Ascension Jesus tells the disciples before his departure to wait in Jerusalem "for the promise of the Father" and "...you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now". And a little later, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Summa summarum what I am wanting to point out is that in the course of time

God made promises through a people he chose as a vessel for all people that through Jesus the promises are kept leading to a new appreciation and to a new way of life. They lead to a new community whose values are directed by Jesus' life, death and resurrection, but also by his understanding of himself and his role in fulfilling what the prophets proclaim and what the law demands.

It is clear in both John's account of the giving of the Holy Spirit and in Acts that the Spirit is a sending Spirit, which may suggest to us words and meanings such as mission, commission, mass, message, and promise to name a few. The Spirit sends people out, people like you and me, to proclaim and live the word and works of God made manifest in Jesus. Jesus was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit. The disciples and the others who were gathered in one place were driven into the streets of Jerusalem by the Spirit. They who had feared the authorities both religious and political are now emboldened to make known the saving, atoning and reconciling work of God. In like manner we are driven into the wilderness, I should say the wildernesses of our today, they are legion. Driven into the cul de sacs and dead ends of so much of our striving to be led, into a new freedom, pastures made green by the guiding Spirit.

In a conversation with an acquaintance I was outlining the challenges that we are facing at Christ Church. The response was a mild rebuke accompanied by a plea for optimism that I do not share. I was being invited to collude, to pretend that everything will be alright to give an unconditionally optimistic message. The words this person longed to hear. It was a get-behind-me-Satan moment. I have learnt through my Christian faith – not that I always heed what I have learnt, I must add – that what we must do as Christians is to name things. It is only when you name something, whatever it may be, that you can start to deal with it. If you pretend that things are other than they are you not only delude yourself, but more importantly you delude others. You invite them into collusion. Can the blind lead the blind? Furthermore, you cannot begin to tackle what is in front of you. Jesus named the demons. He called them out. To make this immediate and topical: the pandemic has made it clear that the wage structures of neo-liberal Western capitalist societies are unjust. It is evident. It has been evident for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Looking elsewhere at this time. Racism is an ever present demon. In what ways do we continue to harbour racism? Only by naming and personally facing our currently skewed spiritual, material, economic values again and again, are we given the power to overcome and move on filled by the guiding, leading and comforting of the Holy Spirit. Driven into the uncertainties roused by the pandemic.

Last Sunday in church Philip Reading led the prayers. He prayed echoing something of what I expressed above, "We pray for this world that you have made and that you love, in all its brokenness. In this health and economic crisis, those of us who have felt safe and entitled now feel threatened and insecure. Have mercy on us, Father, and on all those who have never been able to feel safe and secure."

Fortunately, I have to say, as I have been pointing out, people are rising to the challenges that we are facing with the big unknown, "What will become of the bazaar?" But we can be buoyed up because we see people rising to the challenges in the additional financial offerings being made to plug the hole caused by the pandemic. We see it in the initial response to the restrictions that closed us down physically by ensuring that worship, the lifeblood of our church and the life of the

community, continued. We have seen it in the opening of the shop made possible by younger volunteers coming forward and the dedication of the few. We continue to make a call for new volunteers to come forward. We have seen it in the opening of the church to public worship ASAP. We have seen it through the Jazz ensemble's hosting a fund raiser in the church. We see it in the planning for the autumn and our commitment to stay with the Ministerial Experience Scheme. A sadness for me is that some have not been present to this ongoing life. They will not be aware of how we have supported one another as members "in the household of faith" or of the challenges we are facing.

Many are hoping at this time that lessons will be learnt through the measures that have been taken to flatten the curve, to stem the pandemic fuelled to my mind by an unwarranted optimism. There will be changes. People will adjust their habits, but how many, for how long and to what extent? Time will tell. Some hope for an awakening through the message of the pandemic. There is no clear message except that we must accept that creation seen from a human life-affirming perspective is fragile. Creation is not the safe place we like to make it out to be. Claus Vogl tried to point this out to us during our first observance of Creationtide. Death is our constant companion. John Lennox the apologist puts it this way. There is one statistic that we will all share in and that is death.

The question is do we live in fear of death, or in a new freedom filled by and sent by the Holy Spirit based on Jesus' commandment as formulated in John, "My commandment is eternal life." Of this life I say, let us partake, let us drink. May I commend a healthier way to an awakening into a new freedom, into pastures green, which dovetails with Peter's sermon on the first day of Pentecost. The people, being cut to the heart, ask Peter and the other apostles because they have spoken boldly, "What should we do?" Peter and the other apostles are no longer considered as enemies, but acknowledged as brothers in the house of Israel. This awakening must of course to my mind consist in a turning to Christ and sitting at his feet. Peter replies, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." The Church's message is for all people. We cannot, must not keep it for ourselves. And we must to learn to live out of it at all times and in all seasons of life that we may grow strong in the things of God always asking to be filled by the Holy Spirit who is leading us always into life. The Spirit of God is a sending Spirit.