

Pentecost 2020

Acts 2:1-21

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Today, in the cycle of the readings of the church's year, is the Feast of Pentecost. Penta means 'five' or 'fifty'. The timing is significant symbolically for the Luke the writer of the Acts of the Apostles. It is 50 days after Passover. 50 days after the resurrection.

Jesus has risen, he's appeared in very mysterious ways to various people over a 40 days period. Then he, as Luke rather mysteriously puts it, 'withdraws from them and is taken up into heaven' [Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9]. We mark that event with the **Feast of the Ascension**, which was 10 days ago. So that brings us to the 50 day mark. What's going to happen NOW, we might ask?

According to Luke's account, the resurrected Christ gave clear instructions to his disciples, **"He [Jesus] ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, is what you have heard from me; for John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit, not many days from now"** (Acts 1:4-5).

I find it interesting that there is this pause between the resurrection and the commissioning of the disciples for ministry. After a powerful spiritual experience it is very easy to off half cocked and do some unhelpful things. Maybe Jesus knew that, left unrestrained these disciples might do something very ego driven, like running off to start a new religion, or getting it all completely wrong and believing that God was about to violently overthrow the Romans and install Israel as a new theocracy, with them in the seats of power. And that would have been disastrous to the kingdom of God.

So Jesus instructs them to *wait* for the coming of the Spirit.

And this coming of the Holy Spirit at the Jewish Feast of Pentecost is the *great illumination* for this fledgling group of Jesus followers. It seems to be what gave them the *clarity* and the *motivation* and the *wisdom* for how to move forward.

The Jewish feast of Passover was originally a harvest festival – conducted seven weeks (50 days) after the start of the harvest. It was designed to create a pause, a bit like a Sabbath, to give thanks for the blessing of food and to remember that God was a God who liberated slaves from Egypt (Deuteronomy 16:9-12). But at various times the festival of Passover had also been associated with giving of the Torah on Mt Sinai.

So for this group of followers of Jesus, who at this stage were largely Jews, what they experienced in this Pentecost experience was a kind of massive, expansive, explosion of God's generosity and power and energy and goodness, and forgiveness and mercy to **all people**. Whereas the Law had once been given to the *Israelites* on Mt. Sinai, on *tablets of stone*, now the law was being written on people's hearts.

What the Spirit revealed to them was that, in Christ, God's covenant promises were for ALL people – ALL nations [Luke 24:47]. Peter, immediately after this Pentecost experience, sums it up by quoting the prophet Joel:

*“in the last days it will be that I will pour out my Spirit upon ALL flesh....EVERYONE who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” – that is, not just circumcised Jews – [Acts 2:17]...and*

Note how Pentecost – the experience of the Holy Spirit changes things. Immediately **BEFORE** Pentecost, the question the disciples are asking Jesus is, ‘is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel’. Immediately **AFTER** Pentecost, Peter and the disciples are sharing all their worldly possessions, feeding the poor and hitting the road to heal the sick (Acts 2:43-3:8)

The effect of the Holy Spirit is to **transform the disciples into people who thought and behaved like Jesus**. And I think **this** is the most important point for Christians – for followers of Christ – to remember. The voice of the Holy Spirit IS the voice of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is the one who draws us into relationships with God and with other people **through Jesus**. The word ‘spirituality’ is so vague and nebulous that it can be applied to almost anything if we think of Spirituality as primarily a warm or otherworldly esoteric feeling. It's quite possible to have warm fuzzy feelings of peace and contentment and then go out the very next moment and continue to work on building a better nuclear weapon. This happens in consumer Christianity, in which the church is little more than a Christian baptism of a violent state.

A genuinely Christian Spirituality is something very distinctive and it's not *primarily* about feelings (although it doesn't exclude feelings). **A genuinely Christian spirituality is the transformation of the mind (nous) into the pattern of Jesus and his love of compassion and forgiveness.**

The English bishop and theologian, John V Taylor described the Holy Spirit as the *Go-Between-God*. This **Christ-like God** is a God who reaches out to draw us into ever deeper communion with the eternal love at the heart of the universe – the substrate of all reality. The Holy Spirit teaches us that the meaning of our lives is found in the quality of our relationships, with both friend and enemies.

As this Holy Spirit open us up we will become less concerned for our own personal spiritual insurance plan for the next life and more open to the well-being of all life.

I'll finish with a little story of a lovely and unexpected gift which I received unexpectedly from a stranger a couple of years ago. As some of you know, I oversee the chaplaincy at Rottneest Island. I'm not there every week because we have a roster of clergy, but in the back of the chapel I leave some written reflections for visitors to pick up. It's called 'Reflections from Wadjemup'

A couple of years ago a visitor to the chapel and took a copy of my reflections. A little while later I got an email from here. After talking about some things she found helpful in the reflections, she said this:

*“Well I was just going to say thank you so I'm not sure why I wrote the above but hope you see it as a positive thing I got out of your reflections . Thankyou . You were not there in the church that day but I would most likely not have put myself out to have met you - I'd [have] nodded that's all. Now I know I would smile and shake your hand and say thank you”.*

This is the work of the go-between God – the Holy Spirit, who **connects us** with each other in lovely and humble and unexpected ways, often in random acts of kindness, and doing so, is remaking the world.