

Pentecost:- *God our Contemporary*

Readings: Joel chapter 2, verses 28-29; Acts chapter 2, verses 1-13

Today is the birthday of the Christian Church. So before we do anything else let's sing 'Happy Birthday to all of us'.

The first birthday bash was a very noisy affair. Rushing wind and tongues of flame and much shouting. The Holy Spirit came upon a group of very frightened people and transformed them. Let's reflect on what happened.

Luke says that they were huddled together behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. They were not only fearful but somewhat demoralised. The past six weeks had been a roller-coaster ride for them. Their whole world had fallen apart when Jesus was crucified. Then came resurrection and amazing joy. Jesus had made numerous appearances after His resurrection and their hopes were lifted. Then, suddenly, He was taken away and they felt utterly bereft. They were left to face a hostile world on their own.

Now this. What on earth could experience of a rushing wind and tongues of flame mean?

Above all that God was with them. Remember they were all Jews and throughout the Jewish scriptures fire and wind symbolised the presence of God. So Moses encountered God at a burning bush and was commissioned to lead his people out of slavery. Out there in the desert they were led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When the prophet Elijah had a critical contest with the prophets of the Canaanite god Baal they agreed to build an altar and offer a bull and each would cry to their god. The test was this. *'The God who answers by fire he is God'*. Elijah won that contest. Fire! The accepted sign and symbol of God's presence.

So too the symbolism of wind. In Hebrew there was a single word for "spirit" and "breath" and "wind". The word 'Ruach'. And, in that wind which swept through the house where those frightened disciples were huddled together they realised that God was with them in the power of His Spirit.

On the Day of Pentecost the message for those frightened disciples was that God had not abandoned them. And that is the message for us today. So often we effectively lock God up in the past. We confine His activity to times long gone. So we celebrate the exploits of the early Christians empowered by the Spirit. But that was the 1st Century. Protestants acclaim the reformation sparked by Martin Luther in Europe, but that was in 16th Century. Methodists rejoice in the Spirit-filled ministry of John Wesley and celebrate the working of God through this man which changed the face of England. But that was in the 18th Century. (I'm not sure who the Anglicans acclaim - unless it be Henry 8th!!!) We haven't seen many signs of reformation or renewal since then. And today the Christian Church faces a battle for survival in England and Europe. Where is God today?

Answer is that God is very much alive and still operative. You will not see evidence of this in extraordinary events of nature, certainly you will not see flames of fire nor experience a hurricane in any of our churches. Nor should we expect that. The place to look is for extraordinary events in human nature. For, as Paul said in his letter to Christians in Galatia, the evidence of God's Spirit at work is in less flamboyant ways. Paul echoed Jesus who said *"by their fruit you will know them"*, and expanded that to detail the fruit of God's Spirit working within us. He said *"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness"*. For those who have eyes to see these are the signs that God is with us and active in His world.

The Spirit is not only active in the lives of individual men and women. The Spirit is active in our world as well. You see evidence of the Spirit at work in every attempt to build a just society. And in every movement aimed at feeding the hungry and housing the homeless. And in every peace-making venture which seeks to remove the curse of war and violence from our midst. For God's Spirit is not confined to working through Christians and the Church.

So the coming of God's Spirit on the Day of Pentecost celebrates the truth that **God is our contemporary.**

Yet we cannot dismiss wind and fire altogether. We need to reinterpret them and not insist on a literal understanding. For wind and fire speak of passion and energy and enthusiasm. And in today's world the activity of God's Spirit finds expression in the passion and enthusiasm of Christians. Or so it should. But it is not always so.

I like the story of the village chapel which caught fire one night. The whole village turned out to see this wondrous sight and the Church steward found himself standing next to the village atheist watching the blaze. The Church steward couldn't resist himself and said to the atheist *"First time I've ever seen you this close to the Church"*. To which the atheist replied, *"It's the first time I've ever seen this Church on fire"*.

This week the Circuit sent me a short book which will be the subject of our Leadership Teams deliberations this year. It highlights what it calls the *Five Practices of Fruitful congregations*. They are the practices of Passionate Worship, Risk-taking mission and service, Extravagant generosity, Excellence and fruitfulness, Intentional development in faith. It all sounds a bit 'over the top'. My first inclination was to water-down the hyperbole but today I am having second thoughts. What happened on the Day of Pentecost was hyperbolic. But it was real.

And it changed the disciples who went out and changed the world.