

## **Re-shaping the World: Sermon for Pentecost 2021**

“You pour out your Spirit upon us, Filling with your gifts, Leading us into all truth”

With these words from the Eucharistic prayer for today, the event of Pentecost becomes a present event, and not simply an historical one. This day the Lord pours out his Spirit, enriching us with gifts and leading us into all truth. Like peoples everywhere, the old Israel was shaped by birth & shared history. The new Israel is initiated by the Spirit who desires all the peoples of the world to come together. Why? Because the desire of the Lord is for the peoples of the world to come to their fulfillment and the way to that is by knowing the Lord.

Hymns such as “Breathe on me breath of God” do not reflect how the Spirit acts on Pentecost. For it is characterised by uncontrollability that no structure can contain. With the wind there is nothing it cannot touch and fire burns. But its reality is greater than these weak metaphors. It is imaged for us as wind and fire, but it is made present to us through the crucial reality of language. Words, spoken by tongue, voice, mind, heart & body touch those who hear them. And in this event differences of language no longer keep people separate - they become joined together. This expresses God’s purposes for this event: with the coming of the Holy Spirit, joining has begun.

It is old - because the Spirit speaks what the Lord has always spoken to Israel, but it is new as the Lord speaks more loudly in the voices of the many to the many: join them. This uncontrollable Spirit unleashes an uncontrollable love that builds a new community out of the resurrected body of Jesus. This is love that cannot be controlled or planned and it will drive the disciples forward into the world, crossing boundaries they had hitherto observed. They may be in Jerusalem but they do not stay there long, rather, through the agency of the Spirit, they are taken to the very edges of the known world.

What an unsettling story this really is - and yet how empowering it has proved to be. For this story has been foundational for that Christian movement that has a claim to be the true bearer of the Good News in today’s world. Pentecostal churches flourish from south America to Africa and to China . . . which I have to confess I find unsettling . . . where does this leave Churches like ours?

Without a doubt, in the midst of a seismic rearrangement of the world we once knew, epitomised by the spread of Pentecostal and charismatic churches

on the one hand and by the rise, in the younger generations, of those who identify with no religion. The “nones.” Our moral landscape is being rearranged too as the Church’s traditional teaching and authoritative position are challenged by being ignored and by being called out for having failed to uphold moral standards. The ideals have shifted from self-giving love and self-sacrifice to living the life that is uniquely yours. This shift energises the younger generations from movements such as the Gay Liberation Front to Black Lives Matter and MeToo.

All these many loud voices are challenging the world to change & change for the better. These calls for respect for the individual and their rights are championed in a diverse array of societies and cultures. I wonder if the Spirit is at work there too, drawing diverse peoples together in a way that speaks across the usual boundaries, claim the moral high ground and energise people. Certainly these voices challenge all the traditional upholders of society’s values. Beliefs in God are surviving, those in an afterlife are increasing. But respect for religious authorities has declined.

It’s tempting to gather together in a Church redoubt and see only the selfish or destructive aspects and miss this new re-shaping of the world that is happening. When you think of how this is energised by those who have been trampled on & oppressed, from slaves and Black people to any group different from us, from marginalised peoples of all sorts- this bears the marks of the Spirit and carries the word of the Spirit. Pentecost called God’s people to a new enlarged belonging which was opened up when Christ rose from the dead, and the disciples were impelled to open their doors to those who were different, and to eat food that previously they had seen as unclean. The Spirit leads people into all truth and as the powerful winds blow, this is not always a gentle transition but a turbulent one as we shall hear in coming weeks, how Peter and the others wrestled with the call of the Spirit. Pentecost was a new day and we in the traditional Church are often torn between the wish for the safe familiar and the longing that God may do a new thing. May we too as a Church receive the Spirit and the gifts and may we be led into all truth and the new community of the Body of Christ.

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