

Pentecost in action

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Birthdays are festival occasions to celebrate life and its continuity. Balloons are a mark of festivity. In the Church, Pentecost is a festival occasion for we often speak of it as a celebration of the birthday of the church. The church is called into being through God's gift of life in Jesus Christ—life that comes through the Spirit: the Spirit, whose presence, in that passage from Acts (that we heard read so dramatically a few moments ago), is likened to tongues of flame—of which hovering balloons can be quite suggestive. Similarly, the other readings speak of the Spirit, whose presence is life-giving energy. The gospel reading speaks of the Spirit as the Advocate, who is Christ's presence with us and who leads us into truth. And in the first reading, the Spirit brings life where life seems impossible, even to the dry bones of God's people lying scattered in the valley of Jericho in the Ezekiel passage.

Pentecost celebrates the origins of the church (the Christian faith community) in the gift of the Holy Spirit. Bp John Taylor, in another of his theological books spoke of the Spirit as 'The Go-between God', pointing out that one of the main functions of the Spirit is to create connections—between us (one another), between us and our world, between us and God. This is how we recognise the activity of the Spirit: those moments of luminous awareness of beauty; of deep connection to another human being; of the presence of God. Such moments ARE the presence of the Spirit. Bp Taylor speaks of the eyes of faith perceiving the presence of the Spirit, the Go-between God, generating encounters in which the truth of one meets the truth of another, confronting us all with the beckoning reality of the larger whole, so that in Christ all things will be reconciled to God.

The Acts passage signals this work of the Spirit. It does so in the story of overcoming the barriers of language among the crowd gathered to find out the meaning of the wind and fire, the courage, conviction and joy among the disciples. And when Peter speaks, they all hear, each in their own language. Christians understand this as an undoing of what happened at the Tower of Babel. You remember the story at the end of the opening cycle of mythical stories in Genesis. The tower of Babel is a story of social disintegration. Pride and ambition escalate until human beings find they cannot understand one another—and language, that ought to connect us, becomes a barrier instead. But at Pentecost the barrier is not there and people hear and understand the good news of Jesus Christ each in their own language. And it is a miracle—something happens that is impossible without God's Spirit intervening and bringing about a new thing. The Spirit connects people to each other in connecting them to God and they come to share a common vision that is so powerful that a new community is formed.

The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost challenges us to think about the human community in a new way. The Acts passage describes a community connected across barriers of language and nationality, ethnicity and gender. It is the beginning of a social miracle. Old divisions are swept aside, new connections are formed. The reason is because of the impact of Jesus on the thinking and attitudes of the first Christians.

We know from reading the New Testament that realising these connections in everyday life took some time to work out and we are still working at them. The barrier between Jew and Gentile was the first one overcome and it was settled more or less within the first generation. There was recognition that Jews and Gentiles are equal members of the church because equally connected to God and bearers of the Spirit. But the barriers between slave and free, between male and female, between black and white have taken much longer to get through, and some of these can still be problems for us. It is highly significant for the church, in the

Anglican Communion, for example, that the current Archbishop of York was born in Uganda. This is the story of Pentecost in action—that all artificial barriers are broken down and new connections of justice and respect are built.

That aspect of Pentecost is extremely relevant as again in Australia we observe the Week of Prayer for Reconciliation. In the Pewsheets I quoted Graeme Mundine. He also said, "Reconciliation has two parts, first there is an acknowledgement that something is out of balance; an acknowledgement of sorrow and wrongs. The second part is to take action to make amends. We have seen significant actions in the past two years which have helped Australia move to a better understanding and acknowledgement of the pain and suffering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Actions such as the apology to the Stolen Generations are all concrete steps towards reconciliation. As we celebrate these actions we must not lose sight of the fact that reconciliation is not only a political issue... it is much more than that. ... True and lasting reconciliation will only come from a sustained change of heart at all levels of our community... Can we honestly say", he asks, "that we have stared at the plank in our own eye; that we have wrestled with our own conscience; that we have taken actions in our own lives to open our hearts to true and lasting reconciliation? Until we do so we will not be reconciled".

The message of Pentecost is relevant. The Spirit is about making connections and that is about listening and seeking understanding and setting aside whatever attitudes and language only serve to make the barriers higher. Reconciliation is the Spirit generating encounters in which the truth of one meets the truth of another, confronting us all with the beckoning reality of the larger whole.

The other focus for our prayer this past week has been the unity of the Church. Seeking connection is the basis of ecumenical dialogue among the churches, identifying the things we have in common, building on them and working at understanding the things that separate us. Unity comes as we respond to the Spirit generating encounters in which the truth of one meets the truth of another, confronting us all with the beckoning reality of the larger whole.

Another connection the Spirit helps us make is between our inner and our outer life. It is all too easy to develop either an inward - or an outward-looking spirituality, one that sees faith as a possession that concerns only me and my inner world and becomes self-focussed and barren, or one that is all located in activity and has no inner life-spring and becomes sheer drivenness. The Book of Acts shows how the coming of the Spirit creates a community that manifests its faith in practical help and care, in compassion and sacrifice and commitment to others: and in such simple things, sharing with the needy in Acts 2, taking care of widows in Acts 6, Dorcas and her sewing for the poor in Acts 9. On a daily basis we encounter Christ inspiring and challenging us to be more than we are, drawing us into communion with God and each other and all those whose lives touch ours. The Spirit connects inner spirituality to compassion and loving action.

Yet when we set the picture of Acts 2 in the context of our world, the gap is enormous. Acts 2 with its picture of united and compassionate human community is God's vision for the world, first to be realised in the church and then modelled by the church for the world. Not only do we face our own grave short-comings as Christians, but the situation of the world is enough to make you despair with the sheer enormity of our mess. We live in a world of much division and alienation.

Yet Christians remain full of hope, grounded not in human ability, but in the power and abiding desire of God to transform fragmentation into wholeness, death-giving hatred into

living-giving love. Biblical faith contains the radical hope that history's last word belongs to God, and that this word is not one of judgment but of new creation.

In the passage from Ezekiel the prophet is taken in a vision to the scene of Israel's most horrific memory; to the field where the exhausted remnant of its security forces made their last stand against the shock and awe supremacy of the Babylonian military machine. Historically we know that every single fighting man was slaughtered and the noble families of Jerusalem were deported to refugee camps in Babylon for about 100 years. For the exiled community it felt like everything they had ever believed in, worked for, and held dear was buried with the skeletons in the valley of Jericho and Jerusalem. And in the middle of that despair, the Spirit comes to visit and asks, 'Mortal, can these bones live?'. The Pentecost story tells of the Spirit who comes and calls into question all human despair and sense of impossibility.

When the Spirit comes, even the impossible is rendered possible. When the Spirit comes, even a small, damaged and ridiculously diverse group like the first generation of Christians can begin to dream a common vision and join in a common mission and make a difference. And so can we! Pentecost is the celebration of the giving of that gift.