

# **Pentecost: Beyond Cynicism, Fatalism and Groupthink**

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT, Australia—20 May 2018

Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Acts 2: 1-21; Ps 104: 26-36; Rom 8: 22-27; John 15: 26-27; 16: 4b-15

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I know that many of you were glued to the telly last night watching Prince Harry and Meghan Markle getting married. Annabel Crabb, on the ABC News website, said it's a funny wedding when the bride gets upstaged by the clergy. But that's what happened. The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church of the United States stunned a lukewarm, nominally C of E congregation with a dose of lively African-American preaching. They'd never seen anything like it! Now, I don't know if I can match Bishop Michael Curry's delivery, but the material before us on this Pentecost Sunday makes me want to try. What I want to do today, as we celebrate the sending of God's Holy Spirit and the calling of God's Holy Church, is to contrast the spirit of this world, as the Bible calls it, with the Holy Spirit of God.

The spirit of this world creates an in-group, a dynasty, a clique, a faction, a tribe, a community, a nation, a civilization, a religion, by excluding and demonising something and someone else. It doesn't

matter if you're a tribal Catholic or a devout atheist, a smug Anglican or a Pentecostal zealot; it doesn't matter if you're on the radical green Left or the coal-fired Right: all that matters to the spirit of this world is that we know who the sinners are, that we know who the righteous are, and that we know who deserves judgement, so that everything comes out in our favour. We all know people and places and movements like this; the spirit of this world represents a constant human temptation that we all fall into.

And, friends, the tragic irony is that whenever we claim the spiritual high ground, attacking and rooting out the spirit of this world when we see it at work in others, we end up falling into it ourselves. The spirit of this world is a mimetic vortex from which we can't escape in our own strength. It shapes our language, our sense of race, gender and class, of being able or disabled, of being a success or a failure. Our only escape from the spirit of this world, our only way to recognise it and break free of it, is to sign up instead to the Holy Spirit of God. And, friends, all this is set out in today's Gospel.

There we recognise God's Holy Spirit as our advocate for the defence, as René Girard puts it. Jesus tells his disciples in today's Gospel that the Holy Spirit comes to declare the world wrong about sin, about righteousness and about judgement.

Why is the world wrong about sin? It's wrong about sin because, as Jesus goes to the cross, God lines up alongside the sinners, alongside the offscourings of human contempt. There, on a rubbish dump outside Jerusalem, cursed and condemned by both the religious authorities and the pagan occupiers, who find themselves in sickening but predictable accord, Jesus reveals the mechanism that makes our world go round—the spirit of this world, that is—and he puts a spanner in the works. God's Holy Spirit, the advocate for the defence, now stands up for the condemned and despised in Jesus' name, pointing to the one who now occupies the place of greatest honour at God's right hand, when all the world could manage was to despise and crucify him.

Next, why is the world wrong about righteousness? Because no-one can boast that they're in the right, no-one can stand swathed in their own rectitude while pointing an accusing finger at others, when Jesus Christ himself seeks out that very place of universal condemnation. So, friends, whenever righteousness eludes us, and whatever moral accomplishment we might lack, the shameful place of unrighteousness is where our God chooses to be, close to the failed and the broken, revealed today as their advocate for the defence.

And why is the world wrong about judgement? Because that other, malign spirit, the spirit of this world, is the spirit that's litigious, prosecuting, and judgemental, eager to even the score. And because human beings and human groups are typically like this, we tend to imagine God like this in our own image—we tend to think of God's judgement as the kind of vengeful payback that we know all too well.

Yet today in our Gospel, God the Holy Spirit, who points to the revealing, saving work of God the Son, stands not against us but *for* us, as advocate for the defence. Yes, God the Father does judge, but what's judged and condemned is the spirit of this world, the spirit that connives and excludes, that damns and lynches. And what does God's judgement look like? It looks like vindication! God judges a humanity in love with death and with having the last word by raising Jesus from the dead, pouring out the Holy Spirit, igniting a counter-movement in human history called Church.

God's judgement doesn't let us get away with making history all about cynicism, fatalism and groupthink. Instead, God's judgement liberates us from our worst selves by breaking the power of evil, which is a traditional way of putting all this, enlisting us in a pattern of personal and ecclesial life beyond anything that we're capable of on our own—which of course we call eternal life.

Now, friends, this good news becomes the charter of a whole new world view, a new religion, a new set of spiritual practices. Let me make three points about this, from our other readings this morning.

First, from our Acts reading, we have that marvellous multicultural scene in which Pentecost, the Old Testament festival of the law, now marks a new law that grasps the hearts and minds of God's people. No more tower of Babel, which was a story about human division and enmity. Instead, a new humanity is summoned beyond both isolation and totalitarianism. Here the Church emerges not as a social contract between individuals, as some Protestants think, nor as an impersonal collective, as some Roman Catholics think. Rather, the Church is born as a creation of the Holy Spirit in which unity is achieved at no-one's expense, and where everyone is heard and appreciated in their own voice, in their own right. Here is a template for Christian life together. Here the newborn Church stands around Peter its apostolic leader in witness to Jesus—as Henri de Lubac put it, we see the Catholic Church in its fulness present in one room.

Second, if this is what God's like, and if this is what Christians are liberated and enlivened to discover and to live out, then it goes to the foundations of our whole view of creation. The stories of creation told by a world that has it all wrong about sin, righteousness and judgement are very different—a world that imagines reality as

conflictual and naturally thinks of God as violent. Hence the widespread ancient mythological stories of creation, which started in Babylon and spread around the pagan world—stories in which the high God slays a monster of chaos to create the world. This chaotic element is typically imagined using imagery of water and drowning. But today's psalm imagines something different, with all of this put on notice. The key to understanding today's psalm portion is the image of Israel's God that we see again and again in the Old Testament, who's completely unfazed by the watery chaos of ancient imagination. This is God enthroned above the water flood in another psalm. This is God's Spirit effortlessly moving over the deep to create the world at the start of Genesis. This is God rolling back Noah's flood, whose chaotic waters will never break out again. And this is the Red Sea, turned into God's instrument for liberating Israel from Egypt.

Today in our psalm we see this imagery once again: there is the wide immeasurable sea, and there is that Leviathan—there is that personified figure of evil and chaos that the ancients feared, whose pagan gods had to wrestle with it and subdue it. But here that Leviathan becomes God's plaything, formed to sport in the deep. In other words, violence is not at the heart of reality; our God isn't involved in any sort of self-defining struggle against evil, and neither should we over-dramatize ourselves in the same way. Instead, in

today's psalm, God is serenely in charge, with Leviathan demythologised, and made light of—the monster is transformed from 'Godzilla' into 'Flipper'. Likewise, friends, God the Holy Spirit is able to create a better world than the spirit of this world can do, with all its adversarial obsessiveness.

Now, finally, we need to acknowledge the potential difficulty of all this, and how shaky our faith in it can be. This is why St Paul in our epistle today talks about all creation groaning—and we ourselves groaning, we who have the first-fruits of the Spirit. Friends, this is the now and the not yet paradox of Christianity: we affirm by faith the real presence of Christ and his new creation, never more than here in the Eucharist, yet if we're honest we must also acknowledge our own spiritual inadequacy and the times when God seems absent. Yet in our epistle today Paul invites us to reinterpret those familiar sighs and groans that greet our life's hurts and disappointments, that mark our frustration with ourselves, and with the dreadful behaviour and painful situations all of us have to face. We're invited to read all of this as a sign of God's Holy Spirit at work, praying within us in those all-too-familiar sighs that are too deep for words.

Here we're invited to acknowledge a measure of holy restlessness as the mark of an authentic spiritual life—not a restlessness that gives in to anxiety and obsessiveness, but a restlessness that can be

transformed through patient mindfulness into a robust and resolute Christian character, up for any worthwhile challenge.

So, friends, on this feast day of God's Holy Spirit, when Holy Church receives its charter to be the non-judgemental vector of God's liberating, enlivening mission in the world, Christians take comfort and take courage: we have an advocate for the defence, who exposes and overcomes the spirit of this world.

The Lord be with you ...