

Pentecost: Riding the Big Red Tricycle

Sermon for Pentecost, Year A, 31 May 2020

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Acts 2: 1-21; Psalm 104: 26-36; 1 Corinthians 12: 1-13; John 20: 19-23

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

Let me tell you a story of fearfulness, self-doubt and lost opportunities. It takes place in Brisbane at the end of 1965, breakup day at Geebung Kindergarten, when all us five-year olds moving on to primary school had brought our parents along. I was showing mine around, and wanted to exhibit my prowess on the small tricycle, which was the only one I rode. It was pale blue, and low to the ground, and safe. My Dad asked me why I wasn't riding the big tricycle, which was red and which I'd never been on—surely you had to be a bigger kid to ride that one, or at least braver than me. Still, I didn't want to lose face in front of Dad and the other kids so, with my heart in my mouth, I climbed onto the tailboard then the pedals up to the high seat, took a fierce hold of the handlebars, and started peddling. And you know what? It was exhilarating: faster than the small tricycle, more manoeuvrable, and a ton more fun. They couldn't get me off it for the rest of the afternoon, but then I had to

leave the breakup party and go home and I never had another chance to ride the big red tricycle. I could have been riding it all year, but I'd lacked the imagination and the nerve and the self-belief. So I missed out, and I learned a lesson that I've never forgotten.

Anyway, the Holy Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, God in person in the midst of our life and history, is like the big red tricycle. We can be content throughout life with the small one, the safe one, the familiar one, the one that the little kids queue up for. But with a bit more imagination, and nerve, and daring, we might be in for much more surprising and enjoyable Christian lives. After all, we do have permission. In fact, it's expected of us. We were baptised in the name of the Holy Spirit, along with the Father and the Son completing the trinita. Then the Holy Spirit was called down on us via the bishop's hands at our Confirmation. But many of us can't really imagine what it means to be caught up by the Holy Spirit into the power of Jesus' resurrection, into the life of God, as the scripture and the liturgy promise, which also means being sent out as part of the Church into God's mission. Surely that's overregging it a bit. Surely life's small blue tricycles are more our style, not that big, scary red one, on which we might surprise ourselves—and others.

Friends, we're not the only ones who can't imagine it. Friedrich Nietzsche thought that Christians were weak, scared and resentful.

We're secretly jealous of the big kids who get to do whatever they like, while we settle for mealy-mouthed goodness, afraid of living, dressing up our fearfulness as virtue. And it is true that the Church and its members are often keener on fitting in and not making waves, playing it safe in life and calling that morality. The fact that we fail to attract young people to the Church, who often bring a greater expectation of adventure, may be because they don't see us riding the big red tricycle, which we keep locked safely away.

But wait a minute. It's right there, freshly oiled with chrism, waiting for us bright and shiny every morning. And it's a mean machine. Look at our readings today and you'll see just how mean.

The Holy Spirit in Acts this morning does no less than overturn a whole world order and start something new. All that apocalyptic language in Peter's sermon, picking up on the prophet Joel from the Old Testament, with fire and hail and smoky mist, and the fiery tongues from Mount Sinai now alight in the Church's gatherings, as all races are made counter-culturally welcome and given a common mission, with great rejoicing in every language. The Tower of Babel has been dynamited, the confusion of our language and the bitterness of our divisions have been set aside; human history resets itself for a future marked by unity and solidarity, beginning with this new human adventure called the Church.

Psalm 104 echoes this message this morning, with God's Spirit presiding over creation, over both life and death, and subduing that Leviathan which every ancient seafaring culture feared: the symbol of chaos, of storm and disaster at sea. Leviathan now is just God's plaything, sporting in the deep, which tells us that God's people are being summoned to a life beyond fearfulness.

In our 1 Corinthians passage today Paul starts by telling the Church that they've moved beyond where they were back in their pagan days, with their dumb and powerless gods, and that they've outstripped certain big talkers who claim to be spiritual—because they're caught up in Jesus Christ and his Lordship. Which means that each one of them has a place in the Church's mission, fitting together like a Coronavirus lockdown jigsaw puzzle, where every piece matters.

Finally friends, in our Gospel reading from John today the risen Jesus Christ dispels the fear of his disciples and summons them to join his mission. In the teeth of evil, they're tooled up by the Holy Spirit to live challengingly, to call out the lies, but also to bring new beginnings for people who need them, to forgive and to heal: "whose sins you forgive they are forgiven, whose sins you retain, they are retained." We priests in the Anglican tradition have this

verse read over us at the moment of our ordination, but surely every Christian has their part in the Church's priestly calling: called and freed to live strongly, confident in God's friendship, not paralysed by self-doubt, not letting ourselves be weakened by shame, and hence safe from Nietzsche's critique—it's true for many, but it doesn't have to be true for us.

So, come with me to the heart of God's Trinitarian adventure here in the Eucharist, and get ready to unpack more dimensions of it next week on Trinity Sunday and the week after that with Corpus Christi. Because here in the Eucharist the Holy Spirit's claim on us is renewed week by week. The big red tricycle is waiting and it's got your name on it—your baptismal name.

The Lord be with you ...