

Pentecost: The Organ, the Wind and the Organist

Sermon for Pentecost, Year A at St Paul's, Manuka—28 May 2023

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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.

Regular listeners to ABC Classic will have been left in no doubt that the annual Classic 100 is upon us again. This year the question for Australia is: what's your favourite musical instrument? The anticipation builds in the leadup to the countdown weekend, the great reveal, then the televised Melbourne Symphony Concert, and finally the CD boxed set. Now, on this Pentecost Sunday, when we enjoy a two-organ spectacular by Louis Vierne as our mass setting, I want to use the Church's favourite instrument as an illustration about the Holy Spirit, Christ, and the Church.

This illustration came to me in an unlikely way. In mid-April I'd come to the end of a nine-week writing fellowship at Virginia Theological Seminary, outside Washington. My book was finished and on our last day, when I was going about saying my goodbyes, I dropped in to their Immanuel Chapel for some quiet reflection. But I became distracted by the huge pipe organ set against the front wall, with its blond wood case, its bright silver pipes, and what I'd always thought were distracting large letters on its case—Alpha and Omega, the A and Z of the Greek alphabet, used as a symbol of Christ in the New Testament. Now, anyone who had the misfortune of working with me in the vestry when I was Rector here will recall how impatient I am about clutter, and especially about overly decorated vestments, vessels and glassware, preferring simple, unfussy design. However, as I sat in that chapel looking at that organ and at those irritating letters, I suddenly had a breakthrough insight about church organs in general. I realised that I'd been given the theme of my Pentecost sermon for St Paul's, Manuka, in six weeks' time.

And this is my insight: that church organs are actually a metaphor for the Church itself. Perhaps this is partly why the Church has favoured them. The church organ, with its myriad pipes of different types and sizes, its distinct ranks of pipes with their different characteristic sounds (flutes and oboes and trumpets), yet all of them driven by one uniform breath at the organist's bidding, is how we might think of the Church as led by Christ and inspired by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the Alpha-Omega lettering on the Immanuel Chapel organ, which I'd never liked, became a signal that this instrument is actually an instrument of Christ and a symbol of his Church. The Church organ is very diverse internally yet it's very united, its parts working together to create a music soft and beautiful enough to entrance, yet sometimes powerful enough to thrill and even to confront. Let me explore this in light of today's readings—this insight given to me for you, somehow or other, last month in Virginia.

Our psalm today, which is a bit Wordsworthian, is about the ordered complementarity and stability of God's creation: "when you send forth your spirit they are created and you renew the face of the earth" (Psalm 104:32). But, subtly, it's also about the peace of creation. Other ancient civilizations, like the Babylonians, had creation stories that were full of primal violence and the need to subdue a chaotic enemy—entirely similar to far-right wing American politics! But not in the Old Testament. Not in the peaceful creation imagery that begins Genesis 1 and certainly not in the echo of Genesis 1 that we find in today's psalm. There we have Leviathan, a monstrous ancient symbol of chaos and darkness, not needing to be defeated and dismembered to make the world, as in Babylonian cosmology, but as an

ordinary creature of Israel's God, with a bare supporting role in Israel's drama of creation. So, as I would have said in this pulpit at Pentecost in years past, Leviathan in Psalm 104 is turned from Godzilla into Flipper! Instead of division and disorder, then, all the power is there but it emerges in harmony and peace, like the powerful tunefulness of a great church organ, with its many registers, keyboards, pedals and pipe ranks all working together for the harmonious praise of God.

Now, the creator Spirit is also the creator of Holy Church, which we see imagined in our Acts reading today. And, again, it's about unity out of difference. Those many voices that became discordant and opposed at the tower of Babel, in Genesis 11, are still alive and well on social media. But in our Acts reading today, the world's Babel of conflicting voices, which is everywhere worsening in our post-truth age of conspiracy theories and culture wars, are now brought together in mutual understanding for the praise of Jesus Christ.

Paul in 1 Corinthians today deepens this insight with his teaching on the Church as a community of complementary giftedness in the Holy Spirit, celebrating many different roles in the Church, its witness, and its ministry, all of them ordered by the Spirit of wisdom for the common good. So, spirituality according to the Christian vision isn't primarily about individual preferences, let alone private religious experiences. Instead, it's a common undertaking for a common purpose; it's about making that compelling wall of sound that the Church must present to the world, along with the quiet and intricately subtle voice that the world also needs to hear from us.

Now, it's interesting that in John's gospel today we have another version of Pentecost, different from that in Acts. The newly-ascended Jesus appears to his disciples in the upper room of the last supper late on the very same day as the resurrection. And it's then that he gives the Holy Spirit to his Church, enlisting us in his own mission to liberate humanity from evil: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20: 23). In my illustration of the Church organ as a symbol of the Church, breathed into life by the same Holy Spirit that sounds so variously and wonderfully through the Church's various witnesses and ministries—even through different denominational traditions that make up the Church—the results are orchestrated by Jesus himself. He is the organist in his Church, directing the breath of the Spirit to make the entrancing yet powerful music that the Church can offer the world.

And, friends, this is you, this is me, this is us. Spirituality is more than individuals playing their own little tin whistles, often not very tunefully, and certainly without harmony or with any sort of collective impact.

And so, whether or not the organ is your favourite instrument, which you may or may not vote for in this year's Classic 100, it certainly is the Church's favourite instrument. I've speculated that this is because of its deep affinity with the Church itself: richly internally diverse, yet wonderfully coordinated and harmonious, with the potential to speak both subtly and powerfully, as Christ plays his entrancing music in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord be with you . . .