

Pentecost 4 June 2017

[Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:26-36; 1 Corinthians 12:1-13; John 20:19-23](#) Vanderbilt

[Pentecost Day A June 4, 2017](#) Textweek

What is the writer seeking to convey in the 'story of Pentecost'? The simple reading, and perhaps the most common understanding would see Luke, or the writer, as recording an event, or rather 'the' event, of the coming of the Holy Spirit; and certainly the early Church adopted this literal understanding and developed it even further, such that Pentecost is often portrayed as the very birthday of the Church.

However, in the three readings today, the traditional readings selected for Pentecost, this simplistic and orthodox understanding contradicts itself.

The first reading tells of the arrival of the Holy Spirit as a crowd gathering event exactly fifty days after the Passover, or after Easter; although we read that it only arrived for a few not for all.

The second reading speaks of us being baptised into the Body of the Church to realise the Spirit that is given to all.

And the gospel is different again, it tells us that the Holy Spirit was delivered by the breath of a post resurrection Jesus, and then only to his disciples.

Now rather than follow the age old path of trying to harmonise these three accounts in order to ensure that the literal documentary view of the Scriptures is maintained we might explore some of the intentions and insights that the writers have conveyed.

For if we only stay with the idea of Pentecost as an event, then, like the appearance of the "divided tongues, as of fire", we too will be divided; historically divided from those who before Pentecost never received the Holy Spirit.

And that same permeating division, so often promoted in all sorts of Church teachings, creates a further division between those who have received and those who have not.

These divisions will also be internalised by our sense of doubt as we see others with the Spirit and so ourselves as somehow lacking something.

So we might ask, did those early writers of Scripture seek to create division, or are their stories really vehicles for conveying and engaging a truth that they themselves experienced.

As with much of the early church theology there was a misguided agenda to link the teachings of Jesus to the Old Testament tradition, and again we find that in the attribution of Pentecost to the fiftieth day; the term Pentecost itself comes from the Greek Πεντηκοστή (*Pentēkostē*) meaning "fiftieth". It refers to the festival celebrated

on the fiftieth day after Passover, also known as the "Feast of Weeks" or the "Feast of 50 days" in the Hebrew rabbinic tradition. So the dating of the event in the first reading is very much an attempt to provide the first audience with the comfort of knowing that this is within the tradition they already know; and that of course corrupts the very revelation of Christ that sought to illuminate; an evolution beyond that primitive tradition.

There is however some real power in the whole story and it illuminates a reality that is still experienced today.

Here is a contemporary quote of a Pentecost event from Gareth Thomas, nicknamed "Alfie", who is a retired Welsh professional rugby player;

"He's on fire, I've seen other tries of his against Wasps and Cardiff, and it's good news for Wales."

And surely we've all seen others 'on fire' and experienced the very same for ourselves when we have been at our best.

And that experiential knowing of our Spirit filled selves is what we see in the first reading; and its context is significant; for it was an experience that was made manifest when

"they were all together in one place".

The reality of the early church, its very passion, is told by the writer in only four verses; it is not a theological degree, not a complicated process requiring much description, rather it is an attitude, and orientation and an engagement with passion. And the following eight verses, that's twice the length of the actual story narrative, is an underlining that this orientation has universal implications, it 'bewildered'

"every nation under heaven".

We probably already know the reality of passion, and the fire that Gareth Thomas witnessed; and all too often in our unpassionate lives we turn to the sports field to reengage the feel of Pentecost, or we seek a vicarious living out of passion in some white knuckling TV series.

However there is an enlightened passion that has been experienced throughout time and today we hear where it can be made manifest.

Three more unscriptural quotes to really tune in to the reality of Pentecost;

The poet Rumi;

"Set your life on fire, seek those who fan your flames."

Mahatma Gandhi;

"A burning passion coupled with absolute detachment is the key to all success."

And from Ferdinand Foch a French general and the Supreme Allied Commander during the First World War;

"The most powerful weapon on earth is the human soul on fire."

Today's readings illuminate both the reality and the possibility of being Church; however we have had over two thousand years of celebrating a past event rather than a present reality; congregations around the world today will sit and wonder at the fire that appeared over the heads of some in a distant past age, unaware and unawake to the reality that these readings in Scripture are really a mirror that seeks our true image, our fullest selves.

I've always thought that going to church is a really unattractive proposition; I'm sure back in the Middle Ages and maybe even for most people in the post industrial revolution era, it was an entertaining interlude in an often dreary life. But on the whole, certainly with the various temptations of today going to Church would not top the list of passionate activities we can engage.

And that too is made evident in the text, for the watching crowd were perplexed by the whole event.

The passion of Pentecost, the very fire of life is to be found not in going to Church, but rather in being Church; if we stand to one side and admire the flame that burns in others then we should at the very least fan those flames, for then we too are part of the Divine burning.

The first reading, the narrative of Pentecost is very particular, "they were all together in one place".

No one better than the other, each with a place of real togetherness, a togetherness that attracted a crowd of foreigners and people of different tongues; it speaks of a togetherness in passion and not a sameness in theological interpretation; remember this is the beginning of the Church, and so a togetherness in becoming what was yet to be more fully realised.

And perhaps we are now encountering this same process at St Paul's.

I know the passion of Pentecost and delight in the warming flame that has always been creative of me in my becoming as a priest in this community, and that passion continues to burn; in me and in us.

In preparing the AGM reports, looking back over this last year there is a sense of movement and of newness; we are at a beginning; and when I blow out the flame of a candle and make a wish; I wish I was going to be the next priest who comes to share in our becoming and our being.

On Friday we shared in the breaking of the Ramadan fast with the Muslim community; not sure if they were.

But they spoke a different language, and yet they understood all that we spoke; it was bewildering, amazing and astonishing; for we were all together in one place; a gathering of those seeking the understanding of the Scriptures and experiencing the passion of life lived a place of universal unity.

In two weeks at the AGM we come together to explore tomorrow, we come to fan the flames and we come to allow and to realise that very life is made full as we give ourselves into the Divine fire.

A final quote, from one of today's immaculate Virgins; Richard Branson;
"There is no greater thing you can do with your life and your work than follow your passions in a way that serves the world and you...."

And the ordering of his orientation is not about airlines, rather a life orientation toward others will lead us along a path where will find ourselves together in one place.

Peter Humphris