

Pentecost Visions – Acts 2: 1-21 (Jn 14: 8-17)

Pentecost Sunday 09/06/19, 8.00 & 11.00 at Christ Church

The city was full to burst for the festival. That was true of Jerusalem at Pentecost described in Acts. I observed it to be true at Easter this year. Even though the Old City of Jerusalem, even its walls, even its Roman pavements, do not go back to New Testament times, nevertheless you still get a feel of what it was like: narrow streets, arches and gateways, shop stalls spreading into the streets giving almost no passing room; people ... from everywhere – locals, certainly, but from all over the world – so many nationalities, languages, cultures – and each group trying desperately to do its own thing for the festival. So would it have been on the Day of Pentecost around the year 30AD. And with the city so full to overflowing, so comes a sense that something momentous is happening. Acts 2 begins, in our translation ‘when the day of Pentecost came’, but the original suggests this is the fullness of time – the culmination – a “This is what we’re all waiting for” moment: God’s plan is fulfilled. Jesus’ followers are filled full with the Holy Spirit.

Back to Easter in Jerusalem for a minute: The Orthodox churches – Greek, Russian, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopian, and more – celebrated Easter a week after the Westerners. It was even busier and very enthusiastic. The Orthodox like their candles. We light candles for Easter, each from the newly lit Paschal candle, but to be honest ours is a bit tame by comparison.

Amongst the Orthodox, everyone seemed to be armed with bundles of long thin bees-wax candles (33 in a bundle, one for each year of Jesus’ life on earth). In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre the Easter light is first lit, and then candle-bundles are lit from that flame, and then the light back over people’s heads, each lighting their candles from the person in front. They then bring burning brazier out through the streets of the city, and then on to churches and communities beyond. We caught up with it in Bethlehem, where crowds thronged streets adorned with red and gold bunting, and again everyone was setting their candles alight. We were told the bundles are then divided and people send individual candles as Easter blessings to family and friends who can’t be there. This to me is a vision of Pentecost (come a bit early!). At Pentecost the Spirit came as tongues of fire that, as it were, lapped around the disciples’ heads. Each one was to bear the flame, the power of the Spirit within them. This is for everyone: God’s presence cannot be limited. The Orthodox ceremony reminds us the Spirit isn’t ordered by us. The Spirit burns where the Spirit wills. Ours is to pass on the light, to offer the light, to share the light. But we cannot control where the fire may catch hold – just be ready for the Spirit to do the unexpected!

Acts tells of tongues of fire, and it can be no coincidence that it’s the disciples’ tongues that are (metaphorically) set alight. They just can’t stop talking. Before, they’d been tongue-tied: now words just gush. Before, things seemed so complicated and confusing; now it all makes sense. Before, they hadn’t known what to say; now they have the most important message in the world.

Peter is the first to grasp the opportunity, addressing the crowds in the street. But it doesn't stop with him on day one. The whole book of Acts is the story of the works of the Spirit, and the Spirit works through the words of the apostles. At least one third of the book is speeches and sermons. Nothing can stop them talking. Language proves no barrier: the Spirit jumps right over! Neither Jewish nor Roman authorities can hush them up. Arresting and imprisoning them doesn't work: angels and earthquakes break them out. Full scale persecution scatters them to new places so they keep talking here. And the good news of Jesus ceases to be the property of a small Jewish sect and spreads into the Gentile communities, and reaches the heart of classical culture in Athens and centre of imperial might in Rome. Those tongues of flame will not be doused.

Peter uses a prophecy from Joel to explain what was going on. It starts with vision: 'your young men will see visions and your old people will dream dreams.' Someone paraphrased it: 'Young people are having the prophetic wisdom of the old; the elderly are dreaming dreams again like the young.' By the Spirit, the young stop and think before dashing off on the latest madcap scheme, and draw on the knowledge, experience and understanding of older people. And older people no longer give up on the world, nor do they live in nostalgia for a supposed better past, but get excited again in the possibilities of the present and the potential of the future. It's a fantastic combination, and it's all about vision – vision of what God's rule on earth looks like and how it is coming about.

We've been emphasising over the last week or so to pray a particular line of the Lord's Prayer: 'thy kingdom come.' We may envisage the kingdom of God in many different ways, but as I read Joel's prophecy (repeated by Peter) what stands out to me is that it is both personal and cosmic. It's personal because it's about it's a promise to 'everyone who calls on the Lord'. Every one individual – each and every person on earth, now as then. It's a promise. It's an offer. It's an invitation, to call to God. And the kingdom is cosmic: Joel talks of wonders in heaven and signs on the earth; he talks of the sun darkened and the moon turned blood-red. Whilst these may be metaphors in themselves, they point to God's authority over the cosmos. And the vision he calls us to, the vision of his kingdom is as big as that. In our day it emphatically reminds us of our call to care for the planet he has made and entrusted us with the responsibility to look after. 'Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.'

So let us pray this may be our time of fulfilment, filled full with the Holy Spirit. Let us pray for the Spirit to afresh us and to fill us so we overflow. Let us pray for the tongues of fire to inspire our tongues to speak of Jesus – to talk positively, sensitively, joyfully. And let us pray for new visions – visions that include people returning to God and being saved (for we lose that visionary expectation when we can only think over static or declining congregations); and visions that spread to include all humanity and the renewal of the face of the earth.