

## **Pentecost: Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> May 2015**

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We are finally at the end of the Easter season. The weather has been through at least three years of seasons since the beginning of April and now, this Bank Holiday weekend, we are we hope on the true threshold of summer. It is Pentecost and we have just heard one of the most dramatic and wonderful accounts in the whole New Testament. The coming of the Holy Spirit. The birthday of the Church. And this year I have been prompted to think about an expression I have heard a few times recently: "I don't go to church but I am spiritual."

Before developing that, a little background to the festival we are celebrating today. Why are so many people from so many nations staying in Jerusalem. The reason they were there was that it was the festival season. Two festivals fifty days apart demanded the presence of every adult Jewish male. The first was Passover when the time of the Jewish people's freedom from Egypt was celebrated and remembered and then Shavuot the first of the harvest festivals of the Jewish year. It was also the time when the giving of the Law by Moses was commemorated. Shavuot was set out in the book of Leviticus as needing to be celebrated seven weeks and one day after Passover. For this reason it is often referred to as the Feast of Weeks - Shavuot means "weeks" in Hebrew - or, as seven weeks equals forty nine days and plus one makes fifty days, the Greek word Pentecost meaning "fifty".

The disciples of Jesus are there because they were told by Him at his Ascension to return to Jerusalem and await being clothed in power. They being adult male Jews (or at least the ones we hear about are) have returned in obedience not just to Jesus but to the ties that bind them to the faith they were born into - to celebrate the harvest and the law. The two are intimately connected with each other and with the Passover, the festival that precedes Pentecost. If Passover remembers freedom from Egypt then Pentecost remembers the giving of the Promised Land and the first harvest celebrated in that land. And with this real harvest is the spiritual gift of the Law. The Land and the Law, the two points of the triangle of the Jewish faith of which God Himself is the apex. It would take a series of sermons - ones I would not be qualified to give- to explore properly the Jewish understanding of the Spirit of God. But it is clear that what Jesus is speaking about is a new thing God is to do in their lives.

And so I wonder what Peter, James, John and the others were expecting when they returned for this festival? There is certainly no suggestion that this return to Jerusalem is the same as their return to their fishing boats after the Resurrection. After the Ascension they are commissioned men awaiting the next part of their commission. They are expecting something. Something that will make sense of the extraordinary seven weeks plus one day they have experienced since their last Passover: their first Easter. Something that will make sense of those extraordinary three years they have spent hearing Jesus teach them without fully understanding what he meant. Something that until you know it you cannot imagine it and when you have known it you cannot imagine life before you knew. What someone has called the great "of course" of the soul.

And so it is. What Luke's account in Acts gives us is extraordinary. It is described in detail but it is not I think very easy to imagine. The physical signs are a rushing wind, tongues of flame on each person's head, of people suddenly able to speak or to hear each other's languages. It is a reversal of the Tower of Babel. It is frankly odd.

We must not feel uncomfortable, I don't think, if we do find the description odd. People there at the time witnessing it did not immediately see God at work but alcohol. This little verse "they are filled with new wine" is of course beautifully ironic, for these are the first fruits of the Church. This is the first harvest of God's new relationship with his people. Not the Land and the Law but every land and every man woman and child in Christ.

For this wonderful moment Peter is ready, where in another place and at another time he had not been. The one who denied Christ is now the one who proclaims his Spirit with us. These are beautiful words taken from the prophet Joel: "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams."

For it is this that happens at Pentecost. This is what the wind and the flames and the sudden grasping of things previously not understood shows. It is what is happening in people's hearts and lives. It is that moment of "Of course!"

Of course Jesus is God's Son and of course we are now children of the same heavenly Father. Of course he does not leave us comfortless. Of course the Church inspired by the Spirit of God's love is the living embodiment of Christ with us. Of course! Of course!

But however you do the maths the Church that felt that Pentecostal wind and fire is now nearly two thousand years old. It can feel an old and tired "of course". The Church that found a unity of understanding and voice has had many centuries to fall out and start speaking different languages again. Plenty of time for people to reject the Church and to seek to find spiritual solace elsewhere. To be spiritual without needing to be a part of the Church.

Actually the Church is still, of course, what it started out as: ordinary sinful people extraordinarily transformed by the Spirit of God's love. The finest of treasure in pots of clay. The Church is not IT but WE. All in whom the Spirit lives and acts. Life today can feel far away from that extraordinary blaze in Acts. We can look around us and feel the grip of neither vision nor dream. I think perhaps because we imagine it to be something left in the past or only for rather enthusiastic denominations these days. But the Spirit is at work in his Church in the same way as always. In each of us, one at a time as well as all at once.

For look closely at the flames in Acts. It is not one consuming blaze or a flame that dances from one person to another. It is very clear that a flame rested on each of them and comes to each of us. The Spirit of unity, of prophesy, of love is not a general but an individual gift. And it is an individual gift to each of us. The simple truth of this has rarely been better expressed than in Charles Wesley's lovely hymn. "O thou who camest from above". A stripped down daily Pentecost of God's love:

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire  
to work and speak and think for thee;  
still let me guard the holy fire,  
and still stir up thy gift in me.

And so though I believe we cannot know nor dare to presume how the Spirit is at work in someone who claims to be spiritual but does not come to church, we can probe a little deeper by finding out what they mean by church as much as what they mean by spirit, and we might dare to probe a little deeper into ourselves too and turn things on their head and ask what might it mean to go to church and be spiritual? What this means for us as individuals and as a people together in this place.

This Pentecost may we find time to ask some real questions about the fire that has been set in us. The gifts that are ours to be stirred up. Ask where we are being drawn and led by the Spirit. How true for us is that, "Something that until we know it we cannot imagine it and when we have known it we cannot imagine life before we knew. The great "of course" of the soul." The Love of God in us and with us and for us forever. Amen.