

CHESTER CATHEDRAL 10am

ACTS 2: 1-21

JOHN 14: 8-17

PENTECOST HOLY SPIRIT

Pentecost or Whitsunday is a great time to reconnect with our roots, for all Christian believers are rooted in the extraordinary experience of the first Christian community as recorded by St. Luke in Acts chapter 2.

Today, the feast of the Coming of the Holy Spirit has often been called the birthday of the church. We celebrate with all fellow believers the day when Christians as a body of people, probably 120 folk gathered in the upper room, were given by God the power they needed to carry out the task that had to be done....taking the good news of Jesus to the 4 corners of the earth.

Yesterday was a day to be out and about. Many of us will have enjoyed being out of doors in the sunshine and the open air. My wife Barbara and I were lucky enough to be taken by friends for our first visit to Oulton Park racetrack to watch some Vintage Car races.

The youngest car was a 1957 American Indy-Roadster, the oldest a 1913 Peugeot. They were contrasting shapes and sizes but they had this in common. All were fuelled for the race, the petrol in their tanks gave them the ability to make it to the finish. But would they do well? Would they fulfil their potential?

That obviously depended on the skill of each driver, but it also depended on the set-up of each engine, how well it was tuned. Could it translate the potential into real power? It was fascinating to see little Austins and Morgans up against great big Bentleys and Lagondas, because huge engines could splutter and misfire while smaller ones sailed by. The cars that did well, whatever their size, were the ones that were well-tuned, able to use the potential of the engine and turn it into actual speed on the road.

And it strikes me that the church of today, certainly the Anglican part of it, often misfires because we're out of time with each other, spluttering and stalling in great need of the unity of love and purpose that the Holy Spirit brings.

(PAUSE)

Let's consider afresh then how it all began. How did those first Disciples turn potential into power? On the face of it, their resources seemed very small – what realistic chance did they have of bringing the message of Jesus to the world?

It began with belief and expectancy. Those first disciples had to do something very specific in the days leading up to the feast of Pentecost- they were told by their risen Lord to do nothing, but to wait “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised.

So the days between the Ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit were like a pregnant pause, emphasising that the potential

the potency

the true power is God's-

and the timing is God's.

The gathered group of disciples were taking a real risk by remaining in Jerusalem but they heeded the words of Jesus, and they expected God to act. And so a question for us is: Are we an expectant church? If not then we are necessarily thrown back on our own efforts both in prayer and in service of others. And that way lies frustration. Doing things our way-
-Our spiritual engine mistiming and even prone to seizing up.

Perhaps the desperate situation of the first disciples made things clearer, more obvious.

They were just a handful, what could they do to transform the world for God? They knew that if something world-changing was going to take place then God alone could make it happen. The Resurrection appearances if Jesus had convinced them that a new age had dawned – they believed and expected that God would act. And us today? The Spirit energises us with the love of Jesus and invigorates us with his power when we long for him to do so, when we wait patiently, expecting that God will act in his own way and in his own good time.

Many of the hymns and songs of the church express this longing for the Spirit to come among us. “Come down O love divine, seek thou this soul of mine.”

“Spirit of the living God fall afresh on me.”

And our final hymn today by Charles Wesley is one of expectancy and of longing of sacred love.

“Kindle a flame” says Wesley “on the mean altar of my heart.”

And, as we know, God greatly used the passion and fervour of Charles and his brother John Wesley to disturb and stir up the Anglican Church of their day to the point where it became too uncomfortable an experience for the established church, and so the Methodist church was born. New wine. New wine skins.

If you look at “O thou who camest from above.”, notice the personal language it uses. V.4. “My acts of faith and love”. “Make my sacrifice complete.”

For Wesley the work of the Spirit was personal and life transforming.

This is the present day experience of many which is why we continue to sing his hymns and they still seem so contemporary and relevant.

(PAUSE)

Let’s consider further this improvement of the Spirit beyond barriers.

St. Peter saw the Coming of the Spirit as the fulfilment of the words of the prophet Joel. "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh"- and the outpouring of God's power crosses human boundaries of privilege, class and gender.

The fullness of God's Spirit is God's gift to the Church, but we need to be alert and be able to discern the Spirit at work, pushing the boundaries, beyond the limits even of what we might call "Church". I guess this is what the movement to initiate "fresh expressions" of Church is all about.

The spirit moves in all kinds of ways.

For instance, it struck me last night as I listened to the Cathedral Nave Choir give a tremendous rendering of Handel's 'Messiah' to a packed Cathedral that was listening to an example of God's power at work, going beyond what we can do in our own strength.

Handel was incredibly gifted, equally able to turn his hand to compositions for the King, such as the Royal Fireworks, secular or sacred, opera and oratorio alike.

But why is 'Messiah' of all his compositions so enduring? Even after nearly 270 years? I think it's because it's inspired, in-spirited. The carefully chosen sacred texts inspired Handel to music with an extra dimension - the capacity to touch people inwardly and spiritually.

When the soprano soloist sings “I know that my redeemer liveth, ” it encourages the faith of the audience but through Handel’s musical gift it touches the heart too.

Handel’s ‘Messiah’ was not quickly accepted by the established church in the 18th century. Handel himself was criticised by some for using theatres instead of churches for its performances, and for using singers with too secular a background. Could it be that in fact the Holy Spirit was at it again breaking barriers? Expressing God’s love and truth in a fresh way? Other 19th century oratorios have passed into history or lie on the shelf but ‘Messiah’ remains fresh and accessible. To quote some of the words: How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.” An oratorio from the 270 years ago still able to inspire?

Disciples from 2000 years ago expectant, and then empowered. What about us?

Remember the words of Jesus to Philip in our Gospel reading.

“I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, the Spirit of truth, to be with you forever.

You know him, because he abides with you and he will be in you.”

So the exciting but rather unnerving news for us, today’s disciples is that the Spirit is God’s gift to us in just the same way – to enliven and

encourage us in the faith to proliferate and to transform the potential of love in us into something that can, in turn, bring blessing to the world.

Back to Wesley for words that are prayed as a personal prayer, but in fact immediately unite us and strengthen the bond of our fellowship as God's living Church – reconnecting us with our roots:

“Jesus, confirm my hearts desire

To work and speak and think for thee;

Still let me guard the holy fire,

And still stir up

Thy gift in me.”

AMEN