

## Pentecost 2020

There are two Gospel readings for today – we just have to choose which one to use, and I chose the other one to Fr Mel – John 20.19-23. As it is not in the Newsletter, you will have to look it up.

It may seem odd that St John, in his Gospel account, tells us that the disciples received the Holy Spirit on the evening of Easter Day, whilst St Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, tells us that the Holy Spirit was gifted to them on the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, fifty days later. For John, the theology is more important than the chronology, what happened is far more important than when it happened. Jesus gives to his disciples the Holy Spirit in the room where they are hiding on the day of his resurrection. It is all part of one great act of redemption – death, resurrection, appearance, the giving of the Spirit, the ability to forgive sins – they all hang together as one wonderful working out of the will of God. Jesus breathes the Spirit into his disciples so that they can breathe it out upon others – the beginning of church, a new creation which begins, like Genesis, on the first day of the week when the Spirit hovered over the deep.

For Luke, when things happened is more important than it was for John. The Feast of Pentecost was one of the great Jewish festivals. That is why the city of Jerusalem was full of Jewish people from all over the Roman Empire.

Pentecost had begun as the festival of harvest but later it was changed to celebrate not the giving of crops but the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai – the setting up of the covenant between God and Israel. So for Luke, the gifting of the Holy Spirit, with wind and fire in the place where they ‘were gathered together’- the wind and fire reminding us of God descending on Mount Sinai in fire and cloud and smoke to meet Moses and to give the Law - this violent coming of the Holy Spirit gives us a picture of new gifts, a sign of a new covenant, not between God and Israel, but between God and all mankind, as signified by the fact that the disciples could proclaim the gospel to everyone in their own language. The book of the Acts of the Apostles is sometimes called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. Luke frequently mentions the Holy Spirit both in his Gospel and in Acts. For Luke, the second coming of Jesus does not seem imminent – he thinks the church is moving into the long haul rather than the short run which St Paul had envisaged – but the followers of Jesus are not without Jesus – He is with them in the form of the Spirit. The faithful are living already in a New Age, the Age of the Spirit. For Luke, the second coming is already a reality – we are to stop looking for Christ descending in glory on a cloud to inaugurate a new kingdom. Luke says, in effect, ‘The kingdom is right now. Jesus is present amongst us in the Spirit he promised us. Don’t worry about the final days. Live the kingdom life now’.

But in John’s Gospel, on the day of resurrection, Jesus gifts the Holy Spirit to those gathered in the room. He doesn’t say which room, nor does he say

who is there - ? the disciples; ? the women; ? Mary and the brothers of Jesus – perhaps by this vagueness John means to imply that we are all there – and the door is shut (not locked). Does John mean to imply that we are shut, shut into our sense of guilt, sinfulness, worthlessness, or our pride and self-satisfaction? Are we closed up against the joy of Easter because we are so aware that we do not deserve what has happened and what is about to happen?

‘Peace be with you’. How can Jesus say that to this bunch of men who had deserted him, denied him, failed him? Those men who had refused to accept the testimony of Mary Magdalene and the women who had seen the angels and brought their message, calling their words ‘an idle tale’, the rantings of grieving women. Does Jesus come in with a wagging finger saying ‘Why didn’t you believe the women?’ No, he simply says ‘Peace be with you’. If you had been there, what would you have done? There are times when I think the disciples wouldn’t believe the women because they didn’t dare believe, they were afraid to believe. Having deserted him, denied him, failed him – which was worse? Jesus coming or Jesus not coming? And if he comes, as the women suggested he would, what would he say? He says ‘Peace be with you’ – what a collective sigh of relief they must have breathed. He doesn’t say ‘You are guilty of . . .’ He doesn’t say ‘You are forgiven (or not forgiven)’. He simply offers peace – and then proof – his wounds. Yes, it really is me. Here are the marks of the nails, here the hole in my side. Do not doubt. The risen Christ bears the wounds

of the crucified Jesus. At his Ascension he will carry these wounds with him into the Godhead.

Why does he need to show them his wounds? Perhaps because they are blinded by their unfulfilled expectations – the Messiah coming to Jerusalem in triumph – or by their feelings of loss and despair, just as we can be blinded by fears and tears, especially at this time when those we love are dying ‘before their time’ and in such great numbers.

Jesus simply says ‘Peace be with you’ to those gathered, as he says it to us in our moments of greatest need. Not to criticise, not to make us feel guilty, not to judge – just to tell us that we are loved and that he is here for each of us – coming through the closed doors of our hearts and minds. And not only does he offer peace, he gives us a commission – ‘As the Father sent me, so I send you’. Not ‘would you like to go?’, ‘will you sign up?’ No, we are simply told ‘As the father sent me, so I send you’. That is pretty awesome – we are commissioned to become like Jesus and to do what he did; the Body of Christ commissioned to reveal the love and mercy of God to all we meet. Beautiful – and terrible. We are being sent out into the world to love people as Jesus did – and whom did he love? – the marginalised, the lepers, the prostitutes, the beggars, the rejected. This is no easy commission – but we do not go alone. We go as a community working together for the Kingdom, and we go with the gift Jesus gives us – ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’. Passport and tickets into God’s new creation. We

are sent – sent as a fellowship to proclaim the love, mercy and forgiveness of God.

But what about those other, rather terrifying words ‘If you retain the sins of any, they are retained’? This surely cannot be *carte blanche* to condemn people? I have found, over decades of ministry, that those who are unforgiven are those who refuse to accept that they need forgiveness; therefore those who really do need our love and care.

And, most frighteningly, the worse sins are often not individual but corporate, societal – our treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, institutional racism and misogyny, the appalling wage levels and insecurity of unskilled (but now apparently key) workers, lack of affordable, decent housing, the scandalous differences in opportunity, wealth, health and education, not to mention the suicidal abuse of God’s creation.

If this pandemic has taught us anything it surely is that we are collectively responsible not only for the problems around us but also for finding solutions to those problems.

In John’s Gospel the disciples, the followers of Jesus – that means all of us – move from fear, incredulity and unbelief to dawning faith, unconditional faith, the acceptance of Jesus as Lord – and to embracing his commission.

‘As the Father sent me so I send you’.

Are we up to the challenge?