

Pentecost Year B

'When the day of Pentecost had come ...' It seems strange, doesn't it? Today we think of Pentecost as a Christian celebration, the day on which we remember the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon those who were gathered together, hiding behind locked doors, for fear of the Jews, that is the Jewish authorities. But Pentecost was - is - a Jewish festival - and that is why so many people were in Jerusalem from all over the Jewish diaspora. They had come for the Festival.

Pentecost - fifty days after Passover - was the Jewish Harvest Festival, it marked the end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest; but it also marked the giving of the Law, the Torah, on Mount Sinai, fifty days after the people of God escaped from Egypt and started their wandering Exodus to the promised land. So it was a celebration of the covenant relationship of the people and God. A very, very important festival for the

Jews, which is why there were so many people from all over the Mediterranean in the city. And no doubt the disciples, being Jews, would have wanted to take part - but they couldn't, they were behind locked doors, locked in by their fear, hoping the authorities wouldn't come in, to frightened to go out. But at least they were together, and they were united in prayer. And they were waiting. Jesus had told them to stay in the city, until the advocate, the gift of the spirit, was given to them.

And suddenly from the heavens there came the sound of a roaring wind - how odd, because we have met the Spirit before, and it wasn't a roaring, violent wind. In *Genesis* we are told the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep, and that sounds very gentle, like a parent keeping a watchful eye on a sleeping child. But it is not inactive - God speaks and things happen.

In later writings we have the Spirit being given to prophets, and then to Mary. We are told Gabriel told her

'the Holy Spirit will come upon you', and that Jesus 'became incarnate by the power of the Holy spirit'. Similarly the Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth, and then on her son, John the Baptist, and upon Jesus, when he went to John at the Jordan to be baptised.

But somehow this appearance of the HS is different - it isn't a quiet manifestation for one person, it is for all those gathered there, noisy and vivid and suddenly empowering - it is as if God has torn up the old covenant from Sinai and roared out 'a new beginning; start again'. They unlock the doors, unlock their fear and go out to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, of the resurrection. A few days later Peter and John were arrested and imprisoned for healing a man by the gate called Beautiful and the following day they stood before those who had imprisoned and condemned Jesus and handed him over to the Roman authorities. Peter tells them 'this man (the one Peter had healed) this man is

standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, **whom you crucified**, whom God raised from the dead. And the religious authorities did not know what to do. It was if they had been accused by the man they had condemned. The Spirit which had been poured out upon the disciples was now being poured out, through the proclamation of the disciples, upon the common people - the ill, the disenfranchised, the despised. They heard gladly, unlike the religious elite who stood condemned by their victim, now their judge.

In the reading from St John's Gospel the idea of the heavenly court of judgement is carried on. The spirit demonstrates that the world is in the wrong; wrong about sin, and wrong about righteousness and wrong about judgement. It is in the wrong about its modes of morality (and the cardinal sin is not believing that Jesus is the Son of God); it is wrong about righteousness (it was the Jewish authorities' righteousness which sent Jesus to the cross -

better that one man die than the people perish) - but God uses that as a means of the glorification of Jesus, and so the accusers stand accused; it is wrong about judgement because Jesus' death brings about the condemnation of 'the ruler of this world', this rebellious and decaying world which Jesus had come to save. The Spirit makes God's people sing out of tune with the world around them. The Spirit is the agent of change, of creation's renewal and redemption. The sneering reaction of some of the crowd who heard the disciples on the day of Pentecost wasn't really so silly. In a sense, they were drunk, full of new wine and the old wineskins could not hold it; they would split open. Paul compares it to creation groaning like a woman in labour, waiting for a new world to be born. Peter, reinterpreting the prophet Joel, sees this new world as one of reconciliation - old and young, men and women, slave and free, heaven and earth - all together, filled with the Spirit.

Renewal, redemption, reconciliation. Too idealistic? Surely we should not settle for anything less. We as individuals and we as a whole community need the help of the Spirit in our weakness and rebellion. When we are confronted with the pains and problems of our continued unredeemed existence, when the Spirit proves us wrong about our morality, our rush to judgement, our refusal to be reconciled and to be renewed, that is when we need to rush to prayer. Prayer to the father, in the name of the Son and in the power of the Spirit. And that can be hard work. The woman in childbirth groans - screams - until the child is born, and then knows that it has all been worth it. We must pray, unceasingly, for God's new world to come into being.

Although the witnesses to whom Jesus originally spoke were 'eye-witnesses' - 'you have been with me from the beginning' - they provide a model in many respects for our witness to Jesus today. If we feel that we lack the

requisite power to carry out Christ's commission to be witnesses to the ends of the earth (or even up and down our local streets) in our own generation, we should remember that the promise of the Spirit is for God's people in every generation. The first disciples Jesus recruited were hardly the models of power we would expect, when they began to follow him, but look at them after Pentecost. The entire point of Pentecost is that God will accomplish his purposes through us, not because we are powerful in ourselves - did the Virgin Mary have any power? - but because he will show his power through us.

Come, Holy Spirit, make us a church with open doors, a compassionate heart and contagious hope. Let nothing or nobody distract or lead us astray from the project of Jesus; building up a world that is more just and dignified, more loving and happy, and opening up ways to the kingdom of God. Amen