

**Pentecost, Sunday, June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

**Acts 2:1-21, Psalm 104: 24-34, 35b, Romans 8:14-17, John 20:19-23**

## **Romanticism, the Spirit and the Church**

### **Introduction**

Today is Pentecost. Often the observation is made that, Pentecost marks the birth of the Christian Church, Pentecost is the birthday of the Christian Church. To that end, this morning we have a cake, chocolate sponge no less, and you are welcome to it as we share morning tea together.

That said, this idea that Pentecost commemorates the Church's birth is a bit doubtful: although a nice story. More importantly, it creates an impression: that the Church and the Spirit are one, that the Church and the Spirit function harmoniously, that the Church and the Spirit seamlessly work together. What can we say to that idea: it is quite untrue, it is – to not put too hard a word on it – nonsense. When we examine the history of the relationship between the Church and the Holy Spirit, we in fact find tension, friction, and even dread. Almost always, the Spirit is out there, imaginative, creative, original, while the Christian Church has tended to the opposite: banal, defensive, and hackneyed. How can I encapsulate this? There is an adventurousness, a romanticism to the Holy Spirit, which intimidates the Christian Church, buried in the defence and protection of *the tradition*. The Spirit looks forward to a new creation, to new people, to new society. The Church looks backward to what has been: nostalgically attempting to preserve it, repeat it.

Let me begin with a story! Then let us turn to the Scriptures – the account of Pentecost according to Luke-Acts; and then a conclusion or two.

### **A Story from Experience**

Most of you are aware of my history: I have been with you now for four years. We have come to know each other quite well. Nevertheless, there are diverse ways of explaining personal history, simply because our lives are complex. So, let me reflect upon my sense of calling as a minister and Christian through the lens of Church and Spirit.

As a 22-year-old man, I had pretty much given up on the Church. It seemed to me to be lacking in energy: intellectual and practical. There was a superficiality to its thought, and a tameness to its action. In that context, I made a wager with God: I will go to study theology as a last measure, and You will do the rest. So, in 1977, I began studies in Divinity at Sydney University. It changed my life. For the first time, I could see the theological, philosophical and ethical depth of the faith tradition: I never saw that in my local parish. In the same breath, I became sharply aware through my studies, of the defensiveness and rank conservatism of the Christian Church through the ages. There have of course been wonderful bright spots, but also, and more frequently, periods, long periods, of dullness and conformity.

In the light of those studies, the Uniting Church sent me to Latin America. The purpose: to witness to the mission of the Christian Church in its conflict with the wall-to-wall, military dictatorships on that continent. What I observed in that intense, life changing period, was a Church at odds with itself and in part, at odds with the Holy Spirit. A section of the Church – its majority in fact – longed to preserve its privileged status with the old colonial order of things: its special relationship with the state, and protected role in society. The minority, on the other hand, pursued an approach that demanded that the Church open its eyes to its *real mission*: not preservation of the tradition, but service of the poorest; not offering religious legitimation to what had been, but following the Spirit in opening up new vistas, new possibilities, a new society, a new human being: dignity for all. This was the liberationist Church, which enlivened my faith as never before.

God won the wager. I had studied theology and I had been sent to Latin America. What had been confirmed for me, was this: that Christian faith is about adventure, thinking and doing things in new ways: becoming, with the Spirit, new human beings: to use the term of last week: becoming as gods, God's co-workers.

## **The Reading of Pentecost: Luke-Acts**

Let's turn to the story of Pentecost! This is a heartening story about the Church when it gets it right, when it actually let's go of its overwhelming preoccupation with tradition, guarding and preserving it, and follows the creative imagination of the Holy Spirit. Let's register the salient points!

*First, even in the modern world, we are still extraordinarily defensive.* In answer to the question "Who am I", the answers usually take the form of *my* location, *my* station in society: "I am a white male, I am upper middle class, I am a Korean-Australian woman, I am a mixed-race student". Our self-defined identities are exclusive, where I am different from the other. What I claim for myself, also points to what I am most definitely not. I need not add – it is obvious – that it is frequently at the boundaries of these social- cultural identities where antagonism arises. Their reconciliation is complex and often tenuous.

*Second, the Pentecost event is extraordinary.* Looking at this in greater depth, rather than just its mechanics, what stands out in this narrative is this: that in a world, an ancient world, where identity and self-definition were set down in fixed cultural terms, patterns and preferences, Luke tells us that *this is not the basis* for a community led and shaped by the Holy Spirit. As the Jewish Christian community encounters those who have been traditionally defined as "other," there has to be a rethink to see things in new ways, to move beyond the apparent 'natural' way of the world, and for that matter religion, to something else. And what is it? To – scandal of scandals – incorporate those who had not been a part of the early church's conception of "God's people". It is in these moments of tension, at the boundaries of identity, that the Holy Spirit bursts upon the scene and reconfigures everything. The old traditions are rejected and then overcome. A new reality breaks in.

*Third, for the first time – and if we look at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, this is confirmed – Jews begin to refer to non-Jews as "brothers" (and sisters).* The Gentiles – whose very existence in Israel's view, had created an ethnic social category that meant "*not one of us*" – are here named as belonging to the same people, and sharing the same identity as these Jewish followers of Jesus. In short, these non-Israelite brothers and sisters *are now* fully brothers and sisters, even as they retain their non-Jewish ethnic identities. For Luke, the unity of the Church is *not* based upon shared cultural patterns, Instead, the Church led by the Spirit, exists as a community of reconciled difference, in which deep reconciliation can take place, *without* the obliteration, liquidation of ethnic or gender identities.

*Finally. What does this say about Christian conversion?* Conversion, is explained in the New Testament as "metanoia". We often, especially in the Protestant tradition – interpret this as a change of the heart – a sort of emotional process. But that is to misinterpret. The idea of conversion, of *metanoia*, is actually about a change of the mind (*nous*), it is about the experience of God which relativizes everything else. The old world-view in which we locate our identity and security are overtaken and the new breaks in.

Pentecost was the step toward the formation of a community whose shared identity is not based upon traditions of culture or language but instead, upon the Spirit's gathering of a people *under the Lordship of Jesus*. This is the romanticism of following Christ.