

Pentecost Sunday

9th June 2019

Readings: Acts 2:1-21
Romans 8:14-17
John 14:8-17

Reflection

*'You didn't come in a great wind
 Or in swirling tongues of fire,
 But with a touch as gentle as the wing of a butterfly.
 Yet instantly we knew You,
 Our recognition much older than words
 And we opened like flowers
 To the sweetness of the moment...'*

So writes Joy Cowley in *her* reflection on the Pentecostal experience.

How would *you* describe the 'gift' and working of the Holy Spirit in your lives and in the life of Christ's body, the Church?

One short yet profound Pentecostal experience occurred for me in Jerusalem in 2013. It was both a personal and collective experience of God's love language, when the power of God's Spirit was unleashed in the traditionally identified Upper Room in Jerusalem. The room was crowded and noisy. I looked around and realized something was wrong. Nigerians, Americans, Jamaicans, Australasians, Palestinians and many others including our St. George's College pilgrims were all huddled in separate groups, singing and praying loudly in their *own* languages as if needing to drown out each others' voices. Feeling a definite nudge, but with some trepidation and reticence, I approached the large circle of Jamaicans seeking to join them. Almost immediately, others came, spontaneously holding hands in united praise and worship... and the Holy Spirit immediately drenched us in God's YES (a YES in capital letters), a divine YES that seemed to both affirm and 'delight in' our expressed unity, a divine rejoicing in the intimacy of our relationship with Godself and in our newfound relationship with one another. We were family – brothers & sisters from

around the world, together praising God, *many* dropping to our knees and praying in tongues. The Pentecostal experience was a brief moment in time, but it seemed to those of us present, an in-breaking of the kingdom of God – a taste and promise of things to come. I will never forget it. The memory of it strengthens my faith and hope. In my better moments it gives me courage to continue reaching beyond my own comfort zone, to be willing to break down barriers that divide – both within and beyond the Church.

On the great day of Pentecost, a mighty wind surged forth from heaven, pushing the followers of Jesus out of the house where they had been hiding, and into the streets. Flames danced above their heads, their tongues began to wag, and people from all over the world heard what they said – no matter what their native language.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the first disciples, in that large upper room, and the resultant gift of languages, allowed them to communicate the gospel of God's deeds and power with clarity and understanding to the diverse crowd – all hearing in their own language. This was a powerful reversal on the Tower of Babel account in Genesis 11, when all the peoples who initially shared a *common* language, became *unintelligible* to one another and were dispersed, after they strove for divine power apart from God! In Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, with God's gift of the Holy Spirit, we have a re-gathering, with new and greater understanding – a new beginning – a birthing.

Births are rarely neat, tidy, or quiet, whether it's the birthing of a human being or "something beautiful" within, struggling to be born. The birth of the Church is no different. The feast of Pentecost — originally of Spring harvest — heralds birthing and transformation. The great crowd of converts witnessing the upper room gift of the Holy Spirit was a harvest in its own right, leading to even greater possibilities for growth and new life.

In addition, the disciples, cowering and confused, experienced their own kind of rebirth or transformation by the power of this Spirit who blows into the scene on the rush of a mighty

wind, with great noise and with fire. As with birth, it may not be quiet or peaceful – instead a marathon effort - but it is exhilarating and, in the end, a very good thing.

The Pentecost story is one of the most familiar ones from the days of the early church, so it's easy to pass over the remark about "drunk with new wine" with perhaps only a chuckle, and miss a subtle but important point. Rebecca J. Kruger Gaudino makes a wonderful observation when she connects this scene to Jesus' own words about new wine and new wineskins in Luke 5:37-38, for these new Christians themselves are that new wine, "[bursting] the seams of convention" (*New Proclamation Year C 2007*).

If this story really is our story, too, not just something stupefying that happened long ago and far away, what are we afraid of? What conventions could stand a little bursting, or a lot? Do we feel like we are new wine?

What if we encountered the wildness of God's Spirit, awakening, energizing, and enlightening? What if we felt God speaking in our words and thoughts, or experienced our hearts and bodies strangely warmed in an unexpected, but lively and healthy way?

At Pentecost, mysticism – both communal and individual mysticism – inspires the community to mission. Good news can't be hidden or kept to ourselves. Spirit bursts forth. The first Christians are driven to the streets, sharing good news, speaking in unfamiliar voices and being heard across culture and ethnicity. Everyone gets the message. Diversity is no longer an impediment to unity but precisely the vehicle for the Spirit's movements. But the significance of this outpouring of the Holy Spirit is not so much a *beginning* for the Christian church (although we do celebrate this 'birthing' or *birthday* of the church). Its significance lies in the *way* this outpouring of the Spirit – this breath of God - (promised by Jesus and present from the very beginning of Creation) was, from that moment in Jerusalem, and still is - companionship, guiding and empowering the body of Christ, for its mission in the world – that is - proclaiming the mighty works of God, and bringing in God's kingdom.

This kingdom is a Spirit-filled and Spirit-empowered kingdom of unity in diversity, equality in community, and deep intimacy! (x2)

The amazement of the crowd, who could understand the good news that the disciples conveyed, indicated the breaking down of barriers, especially as fired-up Peter opened their ears and hearts to the immediately recognizable words of the prophet Joel, where God declares: *'in those days I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh'*.

One commentator on this passage speaks not so much of a new language, but of a new appreciation – described as a certain 'Galilean accent' – a Spirit-nudged inner recognition that we all belong to the same human family created in God's image, that we need each other, and that truth is larger than any single group can hold within its words

We all belong to the same human family created in God's image; we need each other, and truth is larger than any single group can hold within its words.

God's Spirit speaks "Abba, Father" and "Ammā, Mother," within us. In experiencing God's sighs too deep for words, we are enlivened and encouraged. Experiencing God's Spirit launches us into new adventures. We experience ourselves as truly loved and sustained and need not fall into timidity or fearfulness. We can push the limits of our comfort zones, imagine new possibilities and then embody these possibilities in daily life, because the Spirit inspires and energizes us as persons and communities.

We all need help to develop a Galilean accent. It is the 'language' and presence of the Spirit of God.

Finally, T.S. Eliot offers another Pentecostal image and language:

The dove descending breaks the air
 With flame of incandescent terror
 Of which the tongues declare
 The one discharge from sin and error.
 The only hope, or else despair
 Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-
 To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
 Love is the unfamiliar Name
 Behind the hands that wove

The intolerable shirt of flame
 Which human power cannot remove.
 We only live, only suspire
 Consumed by either fire or fire.^{1 T.S.Eliot}

The gift of the Spirit – given by Love - may not feel like gift when first received! Being redeemed *from* fire *by* fire indicates powerful transformation. The furnace of Love refines us – both individually and collectively, for Christ’s kingdom work in the world. I wonder - was that original upper room experience initially more of a panic than a picnic?

**I think I’ll be asking God to help me develop my Galilean accent – that special ‘language’ and lively presence of the Spirit of God. (Not just for Pentecost, nor the day after, but for all the days to come.) We can be on our way with new life and new energy, and new noticing about the need in the world and the resources for healing, seeing now that old enemies are really needy neighbours, seeing that what looked like scarcity is enough when shared, enough to feed a crowd when there is gratitude. And we find that we are less greedy, less anxious, less coercive, less self-preoccupied, because we are able to rest our lives and our bodies down in the bottomless goodness of God. We live in community with glad hearts and open hands and risk-taking lives, because the deep deathliness in our own lives has been overcome, transformed, rebirthed.

Let us pray....

Come, Holy Spirit, with your gracious language.

Come, Holy Spirit, with your passion for all people.

Come Holy Spirit, with your uniting peace.

Come, Holy Spirit, with your healing Love!