

The birthday of the Church Acts 2:1-4; Romans 5: 1-5

Today is Pentecost Sunday and a very special day in the life of the Church - local and universal. It is the day we celebrate as the birth of the Church. It is the day when we say Happy Birthday to the Church. For us, on our birthdays: we make birthday wishes; we reflect on the year past, how we feel as we come to another birthday; we think about how life is going; how are we holding up especially as we get older and know there are a few more kinks in the neck, a few more aches in the muscles and especially the knees. Well, you have to admit the church is a good age ... as an institution it certainly has had some kinks and pain and is presently having a few good headaches. Numbers are dropping; in some cases, people are angry at its behaviour. And certainly there are many people who don't recognize its existence, let alone a birthday. If we were to hit the streets and ask passers by "Do you know today is the birthday of the church - I am sure many would look at us blankly, shrug their shoulders and say "Who cares".

"Who cares?" Hopefully - we do!

Let's us go back to this day we call the birth day of the Church; what does the Day of Pentecost mean?

Let's start with the obvious, that word, "Pentecost. Pentecost means "fifty days." It was on the fiftieth day after Passover that thousands of Jews from around Palestine and from around the known world, gathered in Jerusalem for one of the three great pilgrimage festivals in the Jewish religious year. In Hebrew, it's called, "Shavuot," or "Weeks." The Feast of Weeks came seven weeks, after the Passover. Shavu'ot, the Festival of Weeks, is the second of the three major festivals with both historical and agricultural significance. Agriculturally, it commemorates the time when the first fruits were harvested and brought to the Temple. Historically, it celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

But this particular year of our reading from The Acts, Pentecost came seven weeks after a very unusual Passover. It was at that Passover a truly amazing event took place. There had been the crucifixion of one, Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospels record the disciples, men and women, had experienced also his Risen

presence. John records one particular event on the day when they discovered the empty tomb. It happened just after Mary Magdalene had come running to them saying she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken to her.

The disciples were gathered behind closed doors when Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you". He showed them his hands and his side as evidence. Once more he said "Peace to you. As the Father has sent me, I also send you - and then he breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit"

Luke, at the commencement *the Acts of the Apostles* writes: "And Jesus being with the disciples commended them not to depart but to wait for the promise of the Father. For John truly baptized with water but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth". Luke reports that Jesus was then taken up to be with the Father.

And now it is 50 days later and they are in Jerusalem when the Promised Spirit came upon them as they gathered together. It was like the blowing of a violent wind and filled the whole house where they were sitting and we are told that it seemed like tongues of fire that separated and single flames came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now imagine the shock and awe that would bring! What in the world was happening? Well, actually, something not of this world.

We are told the sound came from heaven. The word for "wind," in both Hebrew and Greek, is the same as the word for "Spirit." So the sound of the wind was a sign of the Spirit. This was the breath of God blowing upon them, filling and empowering these disciples of Christ.

But why? Was it just to make a loud noise and create mass confusion, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing? As we read further in this chapter, for the disciples present that day, this

was a sign from God, a sign from heaven. And its purpose? When that sound of the mighty rushing wind occurred, it gathered a crowd. Remember, there were all those thousands of Jews in Jerusalem for the festival. So when they heard the unusual sound, they rushed to see what was going on.

When they got there, Luke tells us they heard something else just as unusual, strange - the disciples speaking in a variety of languages. Obviously, these disciples hadn't learned foreign languages - but Luke continues, the people in the crowd, these Jewish pilgrims from around the world, were able to understand what was being said. Talk about another dose of shock and awe! Of course, people think, they're drunk on new wine.

Peter stands to address the crowd. No! we are not drunk and he starts to preach the good news. The Good News of Salvation is first preached that day of Pentecost in Jerusalem and the Good News has been going out ever since. On that day 3000 were baptised and the chapter closes with these verses we are familiar with: "now all who believed were together and had all things in common. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people and the Risen Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." And over the last weeks we have explored what happened next as we read about Peter and Cornelius and the coming of the Gentiles into the church and then Paul, Timothy, Luke and Silas in Philippi and the coming of the Good News into Europe.

What a Commissioning Day the disciples had. What a day that was for the birth of the church. We may never know precisely what happened on that day, what actually did take place, but what we do know is : the disciples experienced something amazing that turned their world around and it seems the world of 3000 people.

But what does all mean for us today. We are the church of the 21st century. We live in a time when many people shrug their shoulders and say 'So who cares!' Or who say "The church is outdated, boring, causes nothing but trouble ---look at the history of the church as they point Northern Ireland and elsewhere and

even now, people are leaving the church because of past and present behaviour in the church.

And what does it mean for us personally as Christians, the disciples of the 21st century. As witnesses to the Risen Christ in the line of Peter, Mary of Magdala , the first disciples.

The birth of the church is the coming of the Holy Spirit. There are many images of the Holy Spirit: dove, breath, wind and flame. Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit not merely as a comforter but as a wind blowing mysteriously. This morning: let us enter into that image: If we but put up our sails, the Holy Spirit will sail our boat with us; will help us in our daily living.

The Holy Spirit comes to us, fills us and helps us to be open to the human condition and to be creative in solutions to the myriad problems that are the stuff of many of our lives today - work, home, family, study, church, stuff happening in the world, injustice. To allow the Holy Spirit to be one with us, to be breath, to be wind, we need to be open to the Christ, to the Spirit, to the moment, ready to alter plans if we sense a need for immediate change. If we live through and by the Spirit, Christianity, our Church, our congregation, our personal faith, becomes natural and organic, without any of the fixed-smile religion that often goes no deeper to become faith. It is desire, not guilt that is to be our prime motivator in living as disciples in today's world.

This applies to a renewing of the church too. We need to work at the image that is out there of the church. We are the church today ... we are the face of the church. Our task is to make connections rather than raise barriers, and to tear down old barriers in order to move forward to a more positive place. There have been times in the history of our church when we were communities of love with prayer and hospitality at the heart of local life. Maybe it's time to seek to restore these features in church life today.

I know you remember this poem. Today is the day to hear it afresh. Let us listen and allow the Spirit to speak to us through it. To speak to us as individuals and as the people of God of this 21st century here in this place this Day of Pentecost the birthday of the church.

I dream of a church... with outstretched arms
A welcome for all,
Loving, enfolding,
The great and the small.
I dream of church... with an easy smile
A joy to be shared,
Warmly accepting
The timid and scared.

I dream of a church... with busy fingers
A need to involve,
Working and helping
Life's problems to solve.
I dream of a church... with ready feet
A dynamic stride,
Bravely advancing
With patience and pride.

I dream of a church... with thankful voice
Singing of love,
Worshipping, praising,
The Lord high above.
I dream of a church... with listening ear
Attentive to all,
Earnestly waiting
For the Spirit to call.

I dream of a church...
with praying hands
Where any can come
Knowing, believing
The dream has begun!
Sylvia M. Bradford 2004

The Life-giving Spirit comes afresh to us on this birthday, let us ask that we recognize our gifts from the Spirit and that we share our gifts, and let us make a birthday wish that all God's people would be prophets and prophesy. That the church would truly become a community that offers hospitality, love, hope, the Good news to a people in need. Amen

