

Sermon 24 May 2015

‘Be a prophetic witness in a flourishing world’ Acts 2:1-21 John 15:26-27 John 16:4b-15

Prayer: When our hearts are staid and our souls just sigh...renew our Spirits! When our ears are closed and our bones are dry...renew our Spirits! When our minds say “no” and our wills won’t try...renew our Spirits! O God, let your Spirit descend on us and light our hearts and souls with love. Amen.

Pentecost – the day the Spirit of God blew like a wind and changed the world forever. As Catherine the Great of Russia said: "A great wind is blowing, and that gives you either imagination or a headache." Our choice – headache or imagination? Dare I suggest for us today – this morning – **it’s both!**

For so many of the followers of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is a headache: from a worry about having the Holy Spirit (*will it change me????*), about sharing the Holy Spirit (*will they still like me???*), about showing the spirit (*am I supposed to be good and perfect???*), about what the spirit does (*heals, restores, renews challenges and comes along side*) – who would believe???.....

Or ***just imagining what might happen*** if we increased our trusting the power available to us and what we might do towards building a flourishing world where truth and justice and faith rule.!... Cv

This passage from Luke in his book of Acts is the most famous picture of the out pouring of the Spirit of God – but it is not the first, only or last time the great wind of God has swept into this world. But what is different this time is that with ^{*1} “those events, like Moses on the mountaintop or Jesus transfigured, they were reserved for only a few witnesses, the most inside of insiders.

Here, at the dawn of a new era, on the birthday of a church called to spread to the ends of the earth, the display is for everyone. Not just the disciples, gathered in a room, getting themselves together after Jesus is once again departed. Not just the holiest or the most faithful or the most learned, not just the believers, not just those who were with Jesus on the road or witnesses to his Resurrection. **No, in this case, at this moment, “all** flesh,” male and female, old and young, slave and free, are invited and included – and **not just invited** but **expected to prophesy and dream**, too! (Headache? Imagination?)

And **just to make sure** that everyone knows they're included, the formidable obstacle of a multitude of languages is overcome by a sweeping wind, an uplifting Spirit. According to Marcus Borg, the Spirit on this Pentecost undoes what happened on the Tower of Babel (in Genesis 11) as it brings back together the broken and divided community of humankind (*Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*).

It is the same Spirit who drives those initial disciples out, out into the world beyond their walls, beyond the theoretical but fragile safety those walls provide. Out into every part of their known world, past and present, victorious and defeated (Loas’s list!) and compelled to spread the Good News of what God is doing in a new day. Jesus disciples – **with** the power ? **in** the power of the Spirit become passionate, eloquent witnesses for the gift of new life, the beginning of a brand new era in which God is fulfilling promises and salvation is drawing near (*New Proclamation Year B 2006*).

Headache or imagination, God’s wind blows and it is our choice to become part and accept the spirit who comes alongside. The ^{*2} literal translation of the Spirit – *parakletos* is ‘called alongside. So we have it in English as ‘helper / “advocate,” “counsellor.” It is **all this and** more!

For instance today in John’s Gospel, the *parakletos* is called “the spirit of truth” who witnesses to Jesus the Truth (1:14, 14:6). This means wherever Truth is present, or emerging, the Spirit is there; there is one “called alongside” who, many times unbeknownst to us, is urging us toward Truth. And the Spirit brings encouragement. The *parakletos* not only “testifies”—(*martyresei*) to Jesus, but helps the disciples to do the same in the face of opposition from the “world.”

^{*1} Katherine Matthews ^{*2} J Petty, ^{*3} W Loader,

We should also always remember the strong legal association with the Holy Spirit and it is in the sense of it being seen to work as our lawyer might should we ever find ourselves in court. Our lawyer is one who we "called along side" to argue our case. Or, we might remember bible passages where we are promised we have the Holy Spirit "called along side" in our final judgement's defence.

But there is another dimension to what the Spirit does that I want open for reflection linking the legal language of the description of the Holy Spirit and our title which tells us that we are to be a prophetic witness to a flourishing world.... Today! The Spirit is called along-side of us to enable – to make us able – to guide, encourage, inspire which is to give imagination, to be a prophetic witness to a flourishing world. To tell the world in deed and by word and through lifestyle choices and attitude... to tell the world about how through faith the right way to live gives life in abundance now and forever more.

Unpacking that a little using the legal language of the *parakletos* from John's Gospel: ^{*3}A part of what the spirit does is help us make the case for Jesus in the world. Jesus says the spirit is given to help the disciples remember his teachings; to help them grasp what matters in the past, the present and the future leading them into all truth. Not just *any truth* but that which the Son has made known from the Father.

^{*3}Loader pleads that John writes of 3 elements to this case: Sin, righteousness (justice) and judgement. Here John writes that 'Sin' is to reject Jesus. ^{*2} So the first thing the spirit does is to convict the world concerning 'sin' and the antidote to sin is to have **faith** in Jesus. Most translations use the word 'believe' but literally it is to have 'faith' / to trust Jesus, was the beloved Son of God.

Clearly, John intends that the remedy for sin is faith. Faith trumps sin, you might say.

Interestingly our common assumption is that the opposite of sin, is virtue! Isn't our common assumption that the remedy for evil is to try to be good? That would not be the teaching of the fourth gospel. The opposite of sin is not virtue, which no one can ever achieve anyway, **but faith**. Trusting that the story of the cross is one where humanity sinned because love – the love of God was killed on that cross. cv

The second element in the case we are to put to the world is about is **righteousness or justice**. For the world to need convicting regarding justice is to say that what the world considers "just" is not, in fact, justice. The world's "justice" issues end with inequality and poverty; with oppression and want dominating. **That is not just**, says John, according to him Justice / Righteousness was what Jesus lived and died. When he ascended, God, his Father confirmed Jesus way as 'right'. God vindicated him. Jesus' return to the Father works in the same way as his resurrection: it confirms that **God was saying yes** to Jesus: yes, this is my son; **this is my way**.

The third element in the case is judgement. It flows naturally out of the first two elements. The effect of revealing what sin and righteousness are is to expose evil and overcome it. Again, the normal processes of the world are judged and found wanting. The world does not understand its own situation and God's judgement is to dis-empower 'the ruler of this world' (see also 12:31). The judge of this world is not an earthly 'king' or evil personified **but is God** – who has already won. Love and right and justice and truth have overcome sin, injustice and evil, this is what the Spirit helps us witness to a waiting, hungry world.

This then, is our mission: to expose sin as the rejection of love = God in Christ where ever / whenever it happens; to witness to Jesus as the right way of truth and life where ever and whenever it is needed; to make sure these life options are highlighted so that they stand out clearly against any rival system that would kill love, justice truth, and life; to witness a spirituality advocating for the life of God in the world because **that's the way to flourish**.

This means that we receive God's gift at Pentecost as an empowerment which comes with a responsibility to grow in love, to grow in compassion and respect for other people, for all creatures and for the earth. Then, as we live out of this empowerment, we must inevitably make daily choices in the direction of faith, truth, justice and loving inclusion. Then, we are choosing to prophetically witness to a way of life where all the world can flourish. Amen

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