



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2. 1-21

Sunday 19 May 2024

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The Bishop of Chelmsford

(Preached also at St. Andrew's Walthamstow)

At the time of recording this sermon, I'm preparing for a trip to Jerusalem where I'm going primarily to show solidarity and support for the Diocese there, but also to meet with ecumenical and other partners, and to learn more from those whose lives are directly impacted by the current tragic conflict. By the time the sermon is available around the diocese, I will have returned, probably with some changed perspectives and new reflections.

I have visited the Holy Land before, going both to Israel and the West Bank – many years ago now; but these were influential trips, as others who have been there will well understand.

I'm not someone who thinks the ground in the Holy Land, the places of significance that Christian pilgrims visit, are somehow holier than anywhere else. Jerusalem, if you like, is anywhere where Christ is encountered. At the same time there is something encaptivating by these places which is why the bitter conflict of the present feels doubly heart-breaking. I doubt I'll have done much sightseeing on this latest trip but nonetheless I will have been imbibed in the history and spirituality of the Holy Land.

And on Pentecost, I think especially of the Cenacle. Lesser known than many other sites, the Cenacle is thought to have been the Upper Room. In Christian tradition, the room that was not only the location of the Last Supper but where the Holy Spirit alighted upon the eleven apostles after Pentecost. In 2014 the Pope celebrated Communion at the Cenacle and in his sermon he drew attention to the three foundational events of early Christianity that were said to have happened in that place.

The Washing of the feet; the Inauguration of the Eucharist and the descending of the Spirit.

In these three events we have the GIFT OF SERVICE as feet were washed; GIFTS FROM SACRIFICE as we receive bread and wine, his body and blood. And finally, today, the GIFT OF THE SPIRIT as new life and transformation descend on the early disciples and on us.

For Pentecost is the feast when we celebrate the giving of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. The event is recounted in Acts 2, the traditional first lesson for Pentecost Sunday. Clearly the story is presented in a way which makes plain that the claims of the early church are universal in their application, that's the reason for including all the nationalities. The whole of the known world was present in Jerusalem that first Pentecost. I often think of my late father who, when it was reported in 1961 that he was the first indigenous Persian Bishop, correctly, with great pride and a twinkle in his eye reminded people that Iranians, under the banner of Medes and Elamites (unlike the English) were present at the first Pentecost.

Jesus' earthly ministry was fruitful, his resurrection cosmic, and his Ascension heavenly; but now, at the heart of the religious establishment in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit is given and

every nation and tribe hears the gospel in their own language. The Church is to fill the whole world, the mission is begun in the most spectacular form, so amazing and bizarre was the multi lingual preaching that bystanders thought the apostles were drunk.

And that is why the diversity of the church is so important, including our racial and cultural diversity. When Jesus said he would send us another, an advocate, that other came and descended on black and white, of every national distinction, gathered not in their own nations but in **one** central religious place. He descended on them equally, he drew them into **one** community, he set them on fire, not to be distinct from each other but to be a new **family of difference**. For those who decry multiculturalism, here in the Upper Room we have a deeply multicultural community founded and called: THE CHURCH.

Now Let's be honest about this, many Christians outside the Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions are often a little uncomfortable about the claims of supernatural intervention that this sort of religious expression seems to consider common place and even necessary in the life of every believer. But today, whatever Christian tradition we are most comfortable within, we are reminded and invited to celebrate the presence of the Spirit in our midst, whatever expression that might take.

As a diverse Church community we will have to struggle on in trying to figure out what it means to be filled and led by the Spirit. But I want to leave with you two thoughts - two *attributes* of how we experience the Holy Spirit. The first is present in Jesus' words, as he prepares to leave the disciples in John Chapter 14, a little earlier than the reading from John set for today. As he promises to be present eternally through the Holy Spirit, he says, *Peace I leave with you*. Whatever our particular expression of Christianity we should at its heart know the promise of peace. In our so troubled and frantic world; amidst our darkest fears and deepest anxieties, we should always remember the enduring truth of the promise of peace. When our Saviour left us, he left us not Comfortless, but sent us the precious gift of the Holy Spirit who is to be known by the peace that only comes from God.

BUT if we think that all we celebrate in the coming of the Spirit is some warm vague feeling, then we would completely miss the point. The Holy Spirit is God's eternal free agent. The Holy Spirit brooded over creation in the very beginning and still now leads us into new things, new opportunities, new insights. In today's reading from Acts (v17) Peter quotes the words of the prophet Joel. *I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh*. And how would they know? Prophecy, visions and dreams. And how will we know, today? Prophecy, visions and dreams.

Do you have a vision for a world that would be at peace? Do you have a dream of the Spirit leading us into all truth? Will you prophesy a time when all will be valued, not for what they earn, or who they are but for the fact that each is indwelt with the spirit of God? For the

Spirit is unpredictable and blows wherever he wills. The Spirit speaks words of challenge; she bids us shake off complacency.

So today let us pray for peace in the Holy Land, for peace in our world, in our Church and in our lives. Let us pray for the Spirit to renew the whole of creation and make us people of peace.