**15th May 2016**

**Pentecost**

**Acts 2, Ezekiel 37**

France’s Eurovision Song Contest entrance last night was sung by Amir Haddad He’s an Israeli-French singer/ songwriter. He can only hear out of one ear, (that doesn’t matter I hear you say – its Eurovision!). But he still seems to sing better than most people with the use of both. He was selected internally by France’s Eurovision committee and paired with a song chosen by them. The song was controversial in France because part of it is sung in English. The French usually sing their entrance in their own mother tongue. However English is now the common language so most Eurovision’s songs are sung in English. Whether this will change should the Brexit happen and the British leave the European Union next month we shall wait and see.

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is layered with meaning and significance. One of which is that the Spirit enables the disciples to speak in many tongues and people of those nations who have gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost can hear the disciples speak God’s praise in their own language. This is God reversing the curse of the Tower of Babel: the story from the book of Genesis where humanity tries to be like God and build a tower to the heavens and God brings confusion on them by giving them all different languages to speak. With the coming of the Spirit different languages are still spoken but there is now communication and greater unity through understanding and the praise of God. You could argue that we have gone one better today in that everyone speaks English.

The deeper meaning is that the work of the Spirit is to end division, bring peace and unity, order out of the chaos and lead people to understand the gospel and the call of Christ on our lives. So it is a question to ask before you cast your vote in the EU referendum. ‘Would Brexit lead us to get on better with our European neighbours or not?’ There are arguments on either side so as Christians I hope you apply some godly wisdom to the decision. But please let it not just be about the money. There are some things that money can’t buy: peace and unity being a couple of them.

The disciples had named a 12th disciple to replace Judas during the wait between Ascension and Pentecost. This was symbolic to represent the 12 tribes of Israel. God was starting again to renew his covenant people. The people of God with the Spirit of God within them and upon them. The dry bones would live again.

The spirit was God given and came as tongues of fire, symbolic of God’s leading of his people through the wilderness into the Promised Land and now the permanent means by which redeemed humanity might retain communication with the God of eternity. Each of the apostles spoke in a God inspired language yet each language was comprehensible to the quickly gathering crowd. Church was now established as both a gathered and a missional community, a source of God’s presence and a community with a mission to share God’s life.

We were reminded on our Elders Away day yesterday of the significance and importance of Church as a gathered community. Of its calling, albeit in different forms, to be a place of worship and encounter, a dwelling space for the presence of God. It also renews our responsibility to freely offer ourselves to God’s work of mission, wherever life finds us.

Those disciples had an encounter with God through the Spirit and it led them out in great boldness into the world in Christ’s name.

This encounter with God was most dramatic. The sound of wind, the flames of fire. I have been in Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches where there can be dramatic manifestations of the Spirit. People can be speaking in angelic tongues. They can be shaking, or falling down, or dancing or laughing or waving their arms in the air.

Now I’m a little bit reserved so don’t normally go in for that kind of thing. It’s not me! When I have experienced the Spirit it is normally in the stirring within, the conviction, the courage, and the right word at the right time, the feeling of reassurance or comfort.

I shared the story of Jeannie Morgan last week and I told how her youngest daughter had drowned in a swimming pool and she was visited by the local vicar before the funeral. She wasn’t a Christian at that stage and so gave the vicar short shrift. But he prayed in the kitchen before he left that Jesus would come into the kitchen by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jeannie noticed how after that she felt a warmth in the kitchen that had nothing to do with the central heating or the oven. She had a mental image of two hands suspended in space drawing her forward. She felt comforted and was able to comfort others who came to her in great distress at what had happened. The funeral gave a real message of hope that drew her forward into discovering the truth about Jesus. She describes the gentle presence of the Holy Spirit at work in her life over the process of time.

However later in the book[[1]](#footnote-1) she admits to being an extravert and a bit loud and expressive and how she is also at home with the Holy Spirit in shouting out praise or messages and even in dancing. That is her she says. The Holy Spirit usually goes with the grain.

She says we all respond to the Holy Spirit in different ways. Some people are extrovert and loud, some are introvert and quiet. God knows you and how best to fill you with his Holy Spirit. If a person is extrovert and used to being naturally noisy, then the Holy Spirit will probably encounter someone in a way that fits their personality and feels safe and normal.

Likewise when a more introverted person receives the Holy Spirit in a quieter way, the nosier person may doubt that anything has happened at all, but this is not the case; it just reflects their individual response to what the Holy Spirit is doing.

Jeannie Morgan says we must not try to make someone’s encounter with the Holy Spirit into something we want, as it is between that person and Him. She says when the Holy Spirit comes upon her she usually reacts in a loud way. When the Holy Spirit descends on her husband, as a true Englishmen, his reaction is always very peaceful….. the power of God is the same, but we have different responses and reactions to it.

Jennie Morgan tells the story of a prisoner called Jim who became a Christian while in prison. He had previously led a gangster type lifestyle, but was now transformed – well almost! One day Jim was kneeling in his cell praying when another inmate came in, mocking him for praying. Jim wasted no time in head butting this man who, under the force of it, fell to the ground. As he came round, the man said to Jim, ‘Blimey, if it means that much to you, there must be something in it’. He then knelt down and asked Jesus to come into his life too! A week later Jim did exactly the same thing with a different inmate and he too became a Christian. He was beginning to feel called to the ministry of head butting when ‘God showed him a better way!’

The Holy Spirit is not violent and never forces himself on us... He certainly doesn’t go round head butting you. But some people are afraid of the Holy Spirit and what he may do in their lives. I spoke last week that the Holy Spirit is a good gift, not a gift to be afraid of. A gift we need to ask for and to receive. And of course never lose sight of the giver.

But it is a fact that the disciples received this gift of the Holy Spirit in a dramatic way. How would we react if the wind started to blow and flames of fire started to crackle around our heads? Call the fire brigade I guess. And if people started to fall down and shake in our worship, we may ask ‘is there anyone trained in first aid?’ (Hopefully I will be in a few weeks’ time!)

Shaun Lambert is a Baptist minister in Stanmore North West London. He has just done a doctorate in New Testament and psychology. He is part of the New Wine leader’s network. He writes in a book about Christian mindfulness how he heard the call for ministry in a crisis experience lying on the floor at a Christian conference.

He felt God saying ‘take up the word of God which is the sword of the Spirit’. At the same time he saw a picture of a hand holding up a sword or cross of light. His experience is described in come church circles as being slain in the spirit’ or falling in the spirit’. An encounter with God that it literally knocks you off your feet

He writes how Gamaliel’s principle of saying that if it is of human origin it will fail (Acts 5.38) is helpful in analysing such experiences and outpourings. But he still believes we can also start praying, ‘Lord send a revival, and start with me’. Without responding with shallow romanticising or thoughtless condemnation he also thinks that we need to develop our thinking about the supernatural dimension of our faith. In particular we need to develop a theology of crisis alongside our theology of process in the area of God’s transformation of us and the work of the Holy Spirit.

This is what he writes[[2]](#footnote-2): ‘I believe the Bible affirms that alongside a gentle lifelong process of transformation of life in the Spirit, the Spirt may also come upon us in dramatic ways, as a kind of crisis experience. Think of Pentecost. Think of Paul on the road to Damascus. What might the Holy Spirit be doing through such experiences?

Some psychologists talk about safe emergencies’ or a ‘healing crisis’ where people need to find the necessary turbulence to break through into new growth. I believe having that dramatic encounter with the Spirit of God can be such a necessary experience. Paradoxically it is also a safe experience. There are a number of reasons why in our culture we might need to experience such turbulence.

In our consumerist lifestyle we are overworked and under spiritual, often spending very little time listening to God. That part of us that recognises our desperate need to slow down may co-operate with the Holy Spirit, and so we find ourselves overwhelmed and giving the ‘three mile an hour God’ our full attention.

One of the most important changes in psychology recently is the recognition that we have a plural self. Counselling and psychotherapy have recently developed theories recognising the area of multiplicity within a person. Within us are many different parts.

So we have the phenomenon that part of us responds enthusiastically on Sunday morning, ‘praising the Lord’ while within half an hour after the service another part of us is surfing the internet looking at dodgy material. Meanwhile the consumer part of us is refusing to countenance giving to the church because that would interfere with our pursuit of the economic good life.

The crisis of commitment in the church can be explained because only a part of us is engaged with the gospel, while the multiplicity of other parts in us is engaged with the world.

It may be that only the dramatic intervention of falling down physically under the power of the Spirit can bring the multiplicity of parts within us into dialogue with God the Father through Christ by the Spirit.

He talks about life span development theory and how one of the later crises we face from midlife on is between ‘generativity and stagnation’.

This is what he says: ‘My experience of church life is that some religious people cope with massive change in our society by rigidifying. Only a crisis experience where the fire of God’s spirit melts us can break through our calcified defences. God opens our awareness to new possibilities. His mindful grace opens our eyes when sometimes we are unable to open them ourselves.

The question has been asked whether we live amongst one of the most ‘me’ generations ever. One of the manifestations of this is people’s desire to control their lives. Part of the commitment crisis in churches reflects this unwillingness to surrender to God’s will.

Lying on the floor is an appropriate cultural expression of our surrender of God’s control, in a culture where controlling our own lives is such a powerful value.

Spending my formative years at boarding school helped me to be self-sufficient and emotionally unexpressive, like many in our culture. God’s gracious work in process has removed some of those defences and enabled my heart and my mind to come together in a much more integrated way. Recalling that experience of being slain or falling the Spirit he said ‘I stood whilst an Anglican vicar came to pray for me. I didn’t expect anything but he placed his hand on my heart and began to pray for me. It was like being hit by an electric shock and I bent forwards. He put his other hand on my back to steady me and I fell to the ground on my knees and began to weep.

One of the things I began to weep for was the previous hardness of heart and for being content with my small experience of God when I could have asked to be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God as Paul suggests in Ephesians chapter 3(verse19). It felt like being touched by God and touching God.

Here we see the spiritual at work through the freely given grace of God. But I still had to stand in the place where I might possibly meet God. It is in that place and through that experience that my eyes were opened to consider reality. I was no longer to be a bank manager and have a career and even bigger houses and cars. I was to have less and more, much more.

Do you need to have less and yet more much more? Do you need that safe crisis experience in order to break through to new growth, a time of spiritual turbulence to stop you stagnating?

Are you resisting God’s grace in your life? Are you praying to be filled by the Spirit of God, surrendering to God’s way in your life: or do you want to keep control and be self-sufficient? Can we be self-sufficient? Do we have the power? Or do we need Gods help? Do we need a higher power to save us and rescue us and put us on the right path?

We look at the state of the church and cry out for power. We cry out for God to renew us and bring life.

We look at the apathy and even antagonism in our society towards the Christian faith. The faithlessness around us.

Surely our cry should be Lord send a revival. Send another Pentecost. Come blaze with your fire again. Blow through this nation by the wind of your spirit. Stir up life in the dry bones of your church. Lord send a revival and start with me.

1. Jeannie Morgan, Encounter the Holy Spirit, Monarch, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shaun Lambert, A Book of Sparks, Instant Apostle, 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)