**27th May 2012 – Pentecost**

**Acts 2.1-21; John 15.26-27, 16.4b-15**

Today is the birthday of the church – the coming of the Holy Spirit empowering the first disciples to go out and change the world. But instead of talking about the birthday of the church I want to talk about the death of the church.

Next weekend the nation celebrates the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee.

I have just written in the Sharpness link about how the coronation ceremony comprises of various stages: the recognition, the oath, the anointing, the investiture, the enthronement and the homage. Looking at some of the wording we can reflect on how Britain has changed in the 60 years since these words were last used.

In the Oath the Queen swears to govern her peoples according to their respective laws and customs, and to preserve true religion. She is presented the Holy Bible to her saying ‘This is the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is wisdom; this is the royal law; these are the lively oracles of God’.

Would we say the same about the Bible today? Is the most important thing in our society to preserve our religion not our economy?

**In the Investiture** the Sovereign is given the royal robes and insignia, the most notable of which is the crown. When she is seated again, the orb surmounted by the cross is placed in her right hand. As she takes it in her hand the archbishop said ‘And when you see this Orb under the cross remember that the whole world is subject to the power and empire of Christ our Redeemer’. After this the Queen’s Ring in which is set a sapphire surmounted with a ruby cross – the Wedding Ring of England – is placed on the fourth finger of the Queen’s right hand to indicate her being wedded to her people.

Do we live in a fairer society today than it was in 1952? Are we ‘wedded’ to one another in community or is it each to their own? Do we live in a society that looks to Christ as its redeemer? This Jubilee gives us pause to reflect and think about the nation we have become and the nation we wish to become.

I’ve been away this week on my latest module of my Master’s degree. This week has been all about contemporary spirituality – how people find meaning and value today mostly outside of institutional religion

Survey of young people aged 12 to 25 was conducted over 8 countries from different continents recently. Question was asked what it means to be spiritual. In every country apart from the UK about a third of those asked thought belief in God was important to be spiritual. Virtually no one in that age group in the UK thought belief in God classified you as spiritual. Only had about 8% of the survey in all of the other seven countries say they thought themselves to be neither spiritual nor religious. In the UK that shot up to 27%. Yet the UK bizarrely had the highest response rate – almost double of many of the other countries, when asked whether they were doing well spiritually- with 90 % believing they were doing well or OK at being spiritual.

We had a lecture entitled ‘losing your religion’ secularization in Britain. A number of sociologists suggest the outlook for the church is bleak. It’s only because life expectancy has gone up that more churches haven’t gone to the wall. Liberal churches are declining faster than conservative ones – though they are all declining. Liberal ones are declining faster because they can’t agree on the message and who to share it with - indeed whether they should share it at all .Members in liberal churches give, on average only about 1% of their income to the church compared to 10% in conservative ones.. Broadly speaking, the only churches holding their own are the Cathedrals – because they offer excellence in music and aesthetics and anonymity, and churches that have embraced contemporary forms of worship and have a soft charismatic edge – that tap into people’s desire to be more expressive and experiential in their worship. However the broader outlook for all churches looks bleak.

People in Britain are not actively opposed to the church or anti-clerical – they are just indifferent. The cultural mind-set has been informed by a cognitive critique- they have a preconception that religion is primitive, pre rational, pre scientific; there is a political critique believing that religion is oppressive – against equality and there to maintain the status quo; there is the humanist critique: God is not needed anymore to fulfil people’s aspirations and desires. They can find fulfilling life outside of religion and the need for God.

The sociologists conclude that the basic problem is that there is no interest in religion in Britain and they can’t foresee a change in that attitude in the foreseeable future. In twenty years’ time the church will be virtually extinct.

One of my fellows students was an Anglican priest and at the end of the lecture she said she was thoroughly depressed and despairing. I said hold on love, sociologists don’t do the Holy Spirit

Today is the birthday of the church. Today's readings speak of the unleashing of the Spirit of God in the midst of the people of God empowering them, as Jesus had promised, to establish his church and take his gospel to the ends of the earth. They were huddled together, waiting for power. How would a bunch of nobodies go and change the world. It was a wild dream – an impossible task – a bit like believing that the church has a future in our secular British society.

Sociologists don’t do the Holy Spirit. But if they did they may want to be a bit more cautious with their predictions.

First of all the story of Pentecost (Acts 2) is a story about renewed communication: 'filled with the Holy Spirit (they) began to speak in other languages', and people heard their message 'in our own native language' (Acts 2.8). The coming of the Spirit was beginning to break down the barriers of communication between people.

Those hearers in the Pentecost story already had a great deal in common with one another – they were all Jews, and had come to Jerusalem to celebrate a festival common to them all. But they had been dispersed throughout the world by their past history, and the experience, culture and language of their home countries had begun to separate them. What the Spirit did was to bring them together into a new unity. The rest of the New Testament goes on to describe how this new beginning in communication and community spread and involved others, particularly non-Jews, until Paul can say: 'Christ Jesus… has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us' (Ephesians 2.14). A unity in Christ was the basis for a renewed communication between God’s people.

I always find it a joy that people of different backgrounds and understandings of the faith can feel they want to unite with us in the name of Christ. Yet our unity in Christ may be expressed in a diversity of outlooks and views and all of that may be healthy even though its not without its tensions.

Pentecost is the reversal of the Tower of Babel story, in which the world becomes divided (Genesis 11.1-9).The communication that the Spirit brings is not about domination and power, but about love and healing. Language which does not overbear and exclude, but which values and includes, is the gift of God's love to the Church and the world. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, so writes Paul in his letter to the Galatians. He adds that if we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. The church when it keeps in step with the Spirit is a deeply attractive place for people who are battle weary in a competitive world where they are constantly judged, ranked and divided. This is power to change societies.

By describing the scene on the day of Pentecost 'Luke' has given us very insubstantial images of the Spirit – it comes like 'the rush of a violent wind' and lights on the believers like 'tongues as of fire'. In our Gospel passage**,** (John 15.26-27, 16.4b-15), where Jesus is describing the ministry of the coming Spirit, the images are rooted in more substantial and more personal ideas which perhaps illustrate how God may be at work within us to give us the power for faith and service the power that makes a difference in our personal lives.

First of all Jesus refers to the Spirit as an advocate (15.26). I don’t know what your personal feelings about lawyers are. One of my friends is one. Whenever I ring him up he sometimes threatens to charge me fifty pounds for answering my call! The picture Jesus uses is clear – an advocate is someone who can put your case for you when you are really up against it and you can't find the words yourself. But advocates will also be frank with you and say hard things to you and confront you with the truth. But they do this in order to be on your side and defend you as best they can. Linked to this aspect of being an advocate Jesus also describes the work of the Spirit as that of a teacher (16.8-11, 14.26) who will enable us to grow in understanding.

Earlier, in 14.15, Jesus has referred to the Spirit as 'another advocate' which leads us to presume that he, Jesus, is our first advocate, so we can also see the Spirit as another Jesus – but one who can bring the personal closeness and care of Jesus to all of us simultaneously (rather than being physically present with a few disciples at a time). These more concrete and yet more personal pictures of the Spirit usefully supplement the ideas of wind and fire that we more often associate with the Spirit of Pentecost.

Anne Lamott in her best-selling book, *Traveling Mercies* tells of her fear at the appearance of the slightest mole on her body. Her father had died of a malignant melanoma. Even if her dermatologist frowned just a bit, it made Lamott nervous. Coming to her senses she confessed that she believed in God and wrote on a scrap of paper these words: "I am a little anxious. Help me remember that you are with me even now. I am going to take my sticky fingers off the control panel until I hear from you." Then she put the note in a drawer of the table next to her bed and surrendered her future to God no matter what.

Jesus sought to assure his disciples that they did not have to have their "sticky fingers" on the control panel of their lives. He had sent his Holy Spirit to guide them and all that the Father had given the Son they too would have.

Tom Wright, the Bishop of Durham, in his excellent book, Simply Christian, writes that God doesn’t give people the Holy Spirit in order to let them enjoy the spiritual equivalent of a day at Disneyland. Of course if you’re downcast and gloomy (or even if you’re not) the fresh wind of the Spirit can and often does give you a fresh perspective on everything and, above all, a sense of God’s presence, love, comfort and even joy. But the point of the Spirit is to enable those who follow Jesus to take into all the world the news that he is Lord, that he has won the victory over the forces of evil, that a new world has opened up and that we are to help make it happen.

Equally, the task of the church cannot be attempted without the Spirit, under our own steam and efforts. That will lead to arrogance or burnout or both. Without God’s Spirit, the church simply can’t be the church.

In a moment we are going to officially open the newly refurbished community rooms –even if they haven’t been fully finished yet. In March at the AGM of this church we were celebrating that last year had been a good year financially with a surplus of £21,000. At last Sunday’s church meeting we heard that the sum needed from church reserves to make up the funding of the community rooms was £21,000. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away as they say. I pray Lord it would be really nice to have cash in the bank, everyone would feel so much nicer, the sun would shine and all would be well with the world instead of having to fight over money and have the step of faith every time. It would be so much easier if we could rely just on our own strength on our own resources instead of having to trust you for provision. There was a reason why the disciples had to wait in that upper room for God to act and supply the Holy Spirit to be their strength and their power.

Tom Wright goes on to say he uses the word ‘church’ with a somewhat heavy heart. For some it will carry negative overtones of buildings that they associate with sad occasions like funerals, or pompous religious pronouncements, false solemnity and rank hypocrisy.

But there is another side to ‘church’ which shows all the signs of wind and fire, of advocate and teacher and guide. For many, ‘church’ means just the opposite of that negative image. It’s a place of welcome and laughter, of healing and hope, of friends and family and justice and new life. It’s where the homeless drop in for a bowl of soup, and the elderly for someone to chat to. It’s where one group is working to help drug addicts, and another to campaign for global justice. It’s where you will find people learning to pray, coming to faith, struggling with temptation, finding new purpose and a new power to carry it out. It’s where people bring their own small faith and discover that when they get together with others to worship the true God, the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. No church is like this all the time. But many churches are partly like this for quite a lot of the time. And from my perspective as a church minister I am constantly humbled and thankful for the way the Spirit is at work in the lives of people in this church and through this church.

Underneath the differences of nationality and language, there was a fundamental unity that was not only touched but enlivened and experienced, profoundly, by many who were there. Others scoffed and interpreted even the most amazing of events through the eyes and ears of cynicism, but those with hearts and minds that were open to the movement of the Spirit knew that a new day had come.

God is always brining newness – the spirit breezes in like the wind blowing out the cobwebs – freshening up the place. In her book, The Great Emergence, Phyllis Tickle reflects on what she sees as the regular 'garage sale' that the church experiences every five hundred years or so. She, and others, look at the church today and see the possibility that we are in fact in the middle of one of those inspired, cosmic rummage sales: a refocusing of our hearts and minds on what the good news means in our own day, while honouring the contributions of those who have gone before us. Tickle and others see this as a time of great renewal for the church and the churches, an opportunity for re-examination of the fundamental questions and a re-commitment to a renewed living of our faith. Is it perhaps a time for our 'sons and daughters to prophesy,' for our 'young to dream dreams' and our 'old to see visions,' for an outpouring of Spirit that calls from tomorrow overwhelming our preconceived notions and neat perceptions in favour of the expansive and inclusive reign of God?"

Two persons were talking together before a large church which was being destroyed by fire. The first man spoke in a voice which could be heard above the voice of the firemen: "This is the first time I ever saw you at church." To this the second responded: "This is the first time I ever saw the church on fire."

There are many prophets of doom saying that the age of the Christian Church is over - that it has lost its zeal! We're taking a beating right now in this country. Our theology is being questioned. Sociologists doom us. If we do go down - let’s go down blazing. Let’s make sure there is fire in our midst, the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Leslie Weatherhead was an outstanding English Methodist preacher and writer who tells of a visit to Aldersgate in London where John Wesley had his transforming conversion experience. In this small chapel he saw a plaque on the wall that read: "On this spot on May 24, 1738, John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed."

As Weatherhead prayed and pondered about Wesley's "warmed heart" in one of back pews suddenly the chapel door opened and an old man with a cane proceeded to walk down the aisle. When this man came to the plaque, not seeing Weatherhead in the back pew, he read out loud the words: "On this spot on May 24, 1738, John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed." The old man dropped to his knees and exclaimed, "Do it again, Lord! Do it again for me!"

Time and time again the followers of Jesus have testified to a similar experience and such transformations began on that Day of Pentecost following Jesus' resurrection when his first disciples were moved by the Holy Spirit's flame.

We will be unveiling a plaque in a moment thanking those who have given money to the community rooms refurbishment. It will add to the number of plaques that are dotted around this place thanking others for their contribution to this church’s upkeep.

Look we should be putting up a plaque reminding us that it is all grace – it’s all God’s gifts. Not by might, not by power but by my spirit says the lord. That was the message to Zerrubabel in Zechariah 4. He was wondering how he was going to rebuild the temple of God – the word of the Lord was that ‘not by might, not by power but by my Spirit says the Lord.

On this the anniversary of the church let’s give thanks to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit, to renew our communication and provide for us the power for faith and service.

Let us have a moment of silence and perhaps in that silence ask the Holy Spirit to come and renew us and empower us once more.

***Prayer*** *Holy Spirit of God, give us the gift of hearing and of speaking,
so that in a world of many tongues and furiously competing ideas,
where men and women shout but fail to understand one another,
we may tell of the deeds of your love in a way that reaches the innermost heart of those you have given us to serve.****Amen.***

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Picture a little girl lost in a big city. There she sits, crying on the curb. A policeman finds her, puts her in his cruiser and drives her up and down the streets, hoping she'll recognize something familiar. Which, at last, she does. She sees a steeple with a cross on it. Tears vanish.
Speech returns. "That's my church," she says. "I can find my way from here."

You're not the only one, little girl.

William A. Ritter, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com

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 **Kids Story: Popcorn Disciples**
Retell the Acts story using pop corn and a popcorn maker by comparing the unpopped corn in the container with the disciples in the room beforehand – all small and shriveled and hard and contained in a small space. Then turn on the popcorn maker and compare the heat and the hot air in the maker with the Holy Spirit. When the corn pops compare the corn with the disciples afterwards – all big and soft, open and fluffy - and popping up everywhere!!