

Sunday 12th June 2011 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 a.m.		Day of Pentecost - Year A Week of Prayer for Christian Unity	
Acts 2:1-21	Ps 104:26-36	1 Cor 12:3b-13	
		John 20:19-23	
THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT			

FOCUS

The main focus of the sermon

- The coming of the Holy Spirit

BODY – Greetings & Introduction

“Jesus said to them ... ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (Jn 20:21-22).

Today is the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was first poured out on the disciples. They received power for worship, witness and service. Today as the Holy Spirit is given to us afresh, we also reflect on our use of power.

The days from Ascension to Pentecost are known as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. At our 9.30 a.m. service today, we shall be joined by Commem Methodist Church.

Today we also say farewell to Revd BTM Mfenyana, who has been with us on placement for the past six months.

1st POINT – The Day of Pentecost

Claire and I together share what must be a record for having run out of petrol, at least six times. Some of you may know the feeling. There is nothing more humiliating than to call the AA, or the mechanic, and for them to say, “Just put some petrol in.” Or to remember how you drove past the last garage, some 30 minutes earlier, saying to your concerned

passengers, “We’ll be fine!” The road, when you have to walk it, is a lot longer, a great deal further, than when you drive it.

The Day of Pentecost is the day when the power of God was given to those first disciples. We could say that they received petrol in their tanks. They were all together in one place, waiting on God for the promise of the Spirit, praying, reflecting deeply on the events of Easter and the Ascension. Acts 2 tells us:

“Suddenly there came from the sky what sounded like a strong, driving wind, a noise which filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them flames like tongues of fire distributed among them and coming to rest on each one. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them power of utterance.” (Acts 2:1-4).

From that day, from that experience of commissioning, power poured out, the church was born. The story of the early church is a story of the work of the Holy Spirit. The Day of Pentecost marks the birth-day of the church.

As with all our Christian festivals, the feast of Pentecost is rooted in the faith experience of Israel.

At Passover, the Jews were set free from slavery in Egypt by the blood of the lamb. They were led through the waters of the Red Sea to Mount Sinai. At Mount Sinai they received the law, the Ten Commandments, the law that identified them as the chosen people of God.

The giving of the law, the gift of God that gave them identity as God’s chosen people, was remembered at the feast of Pentecost. And on the feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon those first disciples. As the prophet Ezekiel wrote:

“I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh. I shall put my spirit within you...” (Ezek 36:26-27a)

All the wonderful events in the book of Acts - the growth of the early church, the gospel being preached, lives transformed - are rooted in the events of Easter, bursting out into the world on the Day of Pentecost.

2nd POINT – Given... for a purpose

Many themes can be explored on the Day of Pentecost. Mission – being sent out. Transformation. Evangelism. Power. Healing. The fruit of the Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit. Unity. The NT reading focuses us on the diversity of what the Spirit gives us.

“There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are varieties of service, but the same Lord. There are varieties of activity, but in all of them and in everyone the same God is active.” (1 Cor 12:4-6)

The gift of the Holy Spirit to the church says that each of us is valued. A number of people, including many young people, struggle with depression. There is a high rate of suicide amongst young people. Sometimes behind the appearance of success, beauty, popularity, can be a deeply unhappy person. With the gift of the Spirit, God says, “I love you. I enfold you in my arms. I embrace you and hold you as my beloved child, son, daughter.” As St Paul writes,

“The Spirit you have received is not a spirit of slavery, leading you back into a life of fear, but a Spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry ‘Abba! Father!’ ” (Rom 8:15)

The gift of the Holy Spirit to the church says that each of us has been gifted by God. Each one of us brings a particular insight, a God-given charism, gift, calling, which is for the good of the life of the church, and the wider community. We may think or feel that we have nothing to offer. Ask God to show us what our particular gift and calling is.

The charism or gift of solitary prayer, contemplation, intercession.

The charism or gift of building community – making everyone know that they belong, are loved, bringing out the best in us.

The charism or gift of social activism – our prophets, the ones who ask the uncomfortable questions, who challenge us in our complacency, to be radical followers of Christ.

The charism or gift of leadership – ordained or elected, who are there to vision, to hear God for the whole community, to give direction, to lead by example, and by the courage of their lives.

The charism or gift of unity – those who remind us of our bigger calling to remain together with all our differences, our special interests, our personal agendas.

The gift of the Holy Spirit to the church says that each of us is sent out. Commissioned. Called. Chosen. Empowered. We commission Revd BTM as we say farewell. Our country has seen newly-elected mayors and town councillors being commissioned, sworn in, given their tasks. We pray for them and call on them to use their power rightly. The Spirit is our commissioning, given, not just for our own benefit and blessing, but to bless others through us. The Spirit is given for worship, witness and service. At the end of the Eucharist, in the APB, we pray “send us out into the world in the power of the Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory.”

3rd POINT – Gift of new life

“Jesus said to them ... ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (Jn 20:21-22).

It is the gift of new life, new beginnings, for which we hunger and thirst, which we need to receive again and again.

In *The Lion, the Witch and Wardrobe* by CS Lewis, Aslan the lion, who is the Christ-figure, returns from the dead and then goes around breathing on all the creatures that have been turned to stone by the White Witch, bringing them back to life.

“I expect you’ve seen someone put a lighted match to a bit of newspaper which is propped up in a grate against an unlit fire. And for a second nothing seems to have happened, and then you notice a tiny streak of flame creeping along the edge of the newspaper. It was like that now. For a second after Aslan had breathed upon him, the stone lion looked just the same. Then a tiny streak of gold began to run along his white marble back – then it spread – then the colour seemed to lick all over him as the flame licks all over a bit of paper – then, while his hind-quarters were still obviously stone, the lion shook his mane and all the heavy, stony folds rippled into living hair. Then he opened a great red mouth, warm and living, and gave a prodigious yawn. And now his hind legs had come to life. He lifted one of them and scratched himself. Then, having caught sight of Aslan, he went bounding after him and frisking round him whimpering with delight and jumping up to lick his face.”

CONCLUSION

Today God pours out His Spirit on us, to continue the life-giving work in us and through us, so that we may bring life to others. Come, Holy Spirit of God. Move upon us, move amongst us, move in us and through us.