

Sunday 27th May 2012 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		DAY OF PENTECOST - Year B Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Ascension to Pentecost) AFRICA DAY (25th May)
Ezekiel 37:1-14	Ps 104:26-36	Acts 2:1-21
		John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all gathered together in one place...” (Acts 2:1)

Today the church throughout the world celebrates the feast of Pentecost. When the Spirit of God was poured out on those first disciples, the church was born. Today is our birthday! Happy birthday!

Day of Pentecost

Pentecost is one of the Great Festivals of the Christian Church. At Christmas, we are reminded that we worship God who became a human being – God has a human face. On Good Friday, we worship God who suffered and died for us. On Easter Day – we worship Jesus Christ who rose from the dead – we are people of the resurrection. At Pentecost – God sends his Spirit - we are people of the Spirit. The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost transformed people’s lives.

Pentecost was originally a Jewish harvest festival, which was celebrated fifty days after the Passover. It was also part of the salvation history of the people of Israel: at Pentecost, the Jews remembered the giving of the law - the ten commandments - at Mt Sinai.

On the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were gathered together in one place. Suddenly there was a rushing wind, flames or tongues of fire appeared, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability (Acts 2:3-4) –

so much so that people thought they were drunk! It must have sounded like the Rat and Parrot after a serious rugby match.

Peter stood up to speak and to put the record straight. It was too early in the day, he said, for people to be drunk. Instead, what they were seeing and hearing was what the prophet Joel had spoken about: young men would see visions, and old men dream dreams. Upon slaves, both men and women, God would pour out his Spirit.

Things were never the same after that. Peter continued to preach, and in response to what he said, some three thousand people were baptised. The church began to emerge as people put their faith and trust in Christ.

The giving of the law at Mt Sinai was the birth of the people of Israel. Their relationship with God defined and shaped their lives. The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost marked the birth of the church. It transformed people's lives and gave shape to the life of the church.

The feast of Pentecost reminds us: God pours out the Spirit on the Church, to guide us, to transform us, to empower us. Let's be open, as the people of God, to the Spirit's work in us; let's ask the Spirit of God to come upon us and to move in us.

Power, love and truth

What happens when the Spirit of God comes? Three things – we receive the power of God; we are filled with the love of God; we are led into all truth.

Power is a big word. We speak of military power – the power of an army to fight battles. Political power – the power of the government to make laws and enforce them. Physical power or strength – the power of an athlete to run faster, jump further, go higher than anyone else. Economic power that can provide jobs and create wealth. Spiritual

power which can be either good or evil – the power of the amakhosi to destroy someone’s life; the power that alcohol or drugs can have.

The Holy Spirit gives us the power of God. It is the power to create, to heal, to restore, to raise up. It is the power that raised Jesus from the dead. It is the power and the spiritual gifts we receive for worship, witness and service. It is the power to withstand temptation. It is the power that breathes over the dry bones (Ezekiel 37) and brings them to life – the dry bones of our lives, the dry bones of a failing marriage, or a life without purpose, or a community without hope. It is the power that creates hope and a new beginning where there was nothing. It is the power that speaks into a life of despair: “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil...” (Ezek 37:14). The power of God is the power that transforms.

Love is the other big word. When the Spirit comes upon us, we are filled with the love of God. That great theologian, Hugh Grant, said, “Love actually is all around.” You and I are surrounded by the love of others, and we receive God’s love through one another.

But when the Spirit of God comes, we begin to know, at our deepest level of being, that we are loved by God. We realise that we belong to God – that we are held forever in the palm of his hands. “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God...” (Rom 8:15-16). It is the love of God in our hearts that says, constantly, clearly – “You belong to me. You are my son, my daughter. I love you.”

The world upside down

And that is when our world is turned upside down. When we know we are loved by God. When we receive the power of God in our lives. So as we pray for ourselves and for those around us, we pray that the Spirit would move in our hearts and lives, and bring restoration and

hope and new life to the dry bones: for power as a church to reach out with the love of Christ; for the Spirit to come to that struggling marriage; for this young boy who has lost his mother; for that young girl who is living with HIV.

We pray that the Spirit would lead the church into all truth, as Jesus promised (Jn 16:13): in our discussion around human sexuality, whether we should bless committed gay relationships. We pray for the Spirit to guide our life as a cathedral. Certainly Pentecost reminds us that we worship an unpredictable God. We can happily expect the unexpected. So where is God taking us with student ministry next year, as Andy and many of our evening student leaders prepare to leave Grahamstown at the end of this year? How is the Spirit shaping the Cathedral Choir School as Barbara steps down and we appoint her successor? We wait anxiously and expectantly!

What signs of the work of God's Spirit are there, in our communities? Are there signs that the dry bones are coming to life? It is happening. There is a ground-swell, a stirring amongst people, to take back the power that has been lost. This past Friday, 25th May, was Africa Day, the anniversary of the founding of the Organisation of African Unity, now the African Union: a time to celebrate our identity, our achievements, and challenges, as people of Africa. As part of Africa Week, many gathered on campus this past Thursday to show support for Corruption Watch: an independent civil society body recently established to be part of the fight against corruption in SA.

Another example of the movement of God's Spirit, I believe, is the launch of the Citizen Movement for Social Change. At its launch, Dr Mamphela Ramphele, one of its founding members, spoke critically of how we as citizens have "ceded authority and responsibility of governance to political leaders and the government." She quoted the words of a 12-year-old girl, Mapula, in Limpopo: "All I need is to go to a school where teachers are fun and supportive, to play with loving friends and come home to a safe place and a happy mum. I will then become anything I like in life!"

The Spirit of God gives us power and gifts for ministry and witness in our life as a nation.

And on a national level: in the wake of the uproar surrounding the portrait of Jacob Zuma, The Spear: we pray that the Spirit would give us a language to talk to one another as a nation. How do we find words that are honest and healing? Are we able to talk about the moral standards we expect of our leaders? Or agree on an appropriate level of respect?

When the Spirit of God comes upon us, we are changed from being a wounded person to be a wounded healer; we are changed from carrying the burden of years of humiliation to standing and walking tall; from being a passive, helpless victim to being a courageous survivor, someone who finds the strength to make a difference. The voiceless receive a voice. The powerless receive God's power. The unloved realise that they are loved. The subject becomes a citizen. The servant, the slave, becomes a son or daughter.

CONCLUSION

Today we open our hearts and lives for God to fill us with His Spirit. We do so knowing that as God pours His love and power into our lives, things will never be the same again. Let it be so.