

Sunday 8th June 2014 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		DAY OF PENTECOST – Year A Harvest Festival Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Ascension to Pentecost)
Acts 2:1-21	Ps 104:26-36	1 Cor 12:3-13
		John 20:19-23
POWER TO WITNESS		

One of the more embarrassing moments in my life was in the first few weeks after Claire and I were married. She had just joined me at my home in Mbekweni, near Paarl, but was working in Cape Town. So, as a proud and protective new husband, I offered to drive with her into Cape Town on her first day of commuting through to her place of work. As we drove past the final petrol station before leaving Paarl, Claire asked me – have we got enough petrol? Of course, I said, glancing at the petrol gauge. You can guess the rest. The car came to a gentle halt about 10 kms from our destination; shamefacedly, I got out, and we walked into the neighbouring suburb to knock at doors, find a phone – this was well before the days of cell-phones – and directions to the nearest petrol station. Eventually, petrol in the tank, we were on our way. The point of the story: the fanciest car in the world needs petrol power for it to move.

Today is the Day of Pentecost, the day on which the Holy Spirit was poured out on those first disciples. It was the day they received the power of God for worship, witness and service – their petrol in the tank.

The Day of Pentecost

Pentecost takes place 50 days after Easter, and 10 days after the Feast of the Ascension; it is known as the birthday of the church, when those first disciples were transformed from a frightened, timid bunch into a courageous group of people who spoke boldly about Jesus Christ. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the beginning of the large-scale spread of the Gospel. Acts 2:41 records that after Peter had

spoken to the crowd, after he had been filled with the Spirit, some 3000 people were baptised.

Jesus promised to send the Counselor, the Spirit of Truth (Jn 16:5-15); the Day of Pentecost was the fulfilment of this promise.

Pentecost was originally a Jewish festival which marked the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, 50 days after the Exodus and Passover. In many of our churches, Pentecost is usually represented by the colour red, which symbolises the fire of the Holy Spirit.

The Day of Pentecost comes after the great events of Good Friday and Easter, when we reflect deeply on the suffering and death of the Lord, and his resurrection, his victory over sin and evil and death. We are people of the cross; we are people of the resurrection; Pentecost says to us that we are also people of the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that gives us power for worship, witness and service.

Today in the life of the Cathedral is also our Harvest Festival, as we offer from what we have received so that others may also receive and be blessed.

Our readings

Our readings paint the picture of that day in the life of the church. But they also point us to the ongoing work of the Spirit in our lives, and in our world, today.

The key text is the story of the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21). The disciples were “gathered together in one place” when there was a rushing wind, tongues of fire and flame rested upon them; they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and began speaking in other languages “as the Spirit gave them ability.” Then comes the bewilderment of those who heard them – the many nations represented there – and the questions – are these men drunk? This is followed by Peter’s response

and first sermon, explaining what was happening, and giving testimony to Jesus who had been crucified and risen; and showing from Old Testament prophecies that what was happening had been foretold – that the Spirit of God would be poured out on all flesh.

The rest of the book of Acts is a quite remarkable story of the Spirit of God at work in great power and acts of wonder, through those first disciples. Many people came to belief and trust in Jesus Christ; the church grew in large numbers, and spread rapidly; people were healed; lives were transformed and changed by the power and love of God; and then a new community of believers came into existence, not only consisting of Jews, but also of Greeks, and Romans, and people of different languages, different communities, different backgrounds - rich and poor, slave and free. The early church became known for its diversity, its love, its care for the weak and the helpless, its allegiance to Jesus Christ.

We also see, in our readings, that the Holy Spirit was not simply a New Testament invention. **Psalm 104:26-36** – speaks of the work of God in creation - , “when you send forth your spirit they are created: and you renew the face of the earth” (104:32) - the spirit that is breathed out on us all, pointing back to the Spirit of God that hovered over the waters of creation (Gen 1:1)

From **1 Cor 12:3-13** – the immense creativity and giftedness and power for good that we have in our midst – the gifts of the Spirit, given for the common good; the wide variety of skills and abilities and talents – wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, various kinds of tongues, interpretation of tongues; gifts that are ordinary and everyday, gifts that are unusual, charismatic, supernatural; all part of discovering who we are, what have we been given, how are we to use our God-given gifts, our lives.

“All these are activated by one and the same Spirit...” (1 Cor 12:11)

We are gifted to serve and love one another; this is not a power trip for our own egos; we are all members of one body; we need one another.

In our Gospel reading, **John 20:19-23**, the Spirit of God is given to the disciples by the risen Christ, as he appears to them, shows them his hands and his side, breathes on them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” with the power to forgive and to set free.

The apostle St Paul writes of the work of the Holy Spirit – as enabling us to cry “Abba, Father” – to know that we are sons and daughters of God, that we belong to God – when we are filled with the Spirit, we become children of God, we are assured that we indeed belong to God. It is the work of the Spirit that makes us one body, and gives us gifts for the common good – “in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one Body.” (Rom 14:9). Let us then pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life.” It is the fruit of the Spirit in our lives that makes all the difference in our hurting and angry world – the fruit, the results of the Spirit in us, is found in our love, our joy, our peace, our patience, our kindness, our goodness, our faithfulness, our gentleness, our self-control (Gal 5). “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”

And the life of the church continues to be empowered by the Spirit in us and through us. At the start of every act of worship, at the start of every meeting, we invite the Spirit. “Come, Holy Spirit of God. Move upon us, move in us and through us. Use us as your instruments, as channels for your love and power. May your will be done through us and amongst us.”

Again and again, in our life of worship and witness and service, we ask the Spirit to move in us. “I anoint you with oil in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. May our heavenly Father make you whole in body and mind, *and grant you the inward anointing of his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of strength and joy and peace.*” (AAPB pg 506, # 46)

Our life today

On this Day of Pentecost let us open ourselves once again to the power of the Spirit, to move in us and through us, to assure us that we are sons and daughters of God; let us ask the Spirit to draw us deeper into the love of God; let us invite the Spirit of God to fill us with power and courage and wisdom, let us call on the Spirit of God to give us the gifts we need for ministry, for service.

What do we hope for, as we ask the Spirit of God to fill us, to move in us?

Certainly we pray and ask for a new energy in our care for the environment, following World Environment Day on June 5th; for a new energy and commitment to be peace-makers, following the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy, on June 6th; for a new commitment to the well-being and safety of all, as we continue to pray for the 276 Nigerian girls kidnapped by Boko Haram; for a renewed care for those without homes and shelter, especially in this cold winter weather; for a deeper care and compassion for the hungry, as the workers strike at Marikana continues into its 5th month. We see the work of the Spirit in the immense creativity that is unleashed here in Grahamstown during the National Arts Festival; for the life-giving experience of being immersed in music and drama and art, the feast of word and beauty and wonder. The Spirit of God at work in us and through us.

My particular prayer, on this Day of Pentecost, is that we would be given a new energy for evangelism. In a recent talk, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, called on everyone “who counts themselves as a follower of Jesus, to ... [ask] the Holy Spirit to work across the country in our parishes and communities, our friends and our neighbours, and in his Church, that the good news of Jesus Christ can be proclaimed, heard, lived and trusted.” Archbishop Justin then gave three reasons why we should do this:

1. “Because ‘evangel’ means literally the proclamation of ‘good news’. We have received the good news of the life that Jesus brings us, giving us grace and mercy and hope. This is the most wonderful news that any of us could ever receive. Following Jesus is the best decision any person can ever make. We are convinced of this.”
2. “Because we cannot persuade people about the truth that is in Jesus – only God can do this. The Holy Spirit is the only one who can work to open someone’s eyes to glimpse the beauty of Jesus, or unstop someone’s ears to hear his voice inviting them to receive the words of life... We must pray for the work of the Holy Spirit on each and every person, in every community in this country.”
3. “Because as a Church we know that we cannot do this on our own... We can easily be disheartened. But God never leaves us on our own... He sends his Spirit to commission us, send us, empower us and help us present Jesus Christ – his life, his death, his resurrection – to each and every person.

This is what we talk about when we talk about evangelism. Or more accurately, this is *who* we talk about when we talk about evangelism. Because it is all about issuing the invitation of Jesus Christ to follow him. And that is an invitation which is issued to all.”

And when we do this – when we respond to that invitation to find and discover the new life that is in Jesus – it is not that all our problems disappear. Rather, we discover that we enter into a new life, a new way of belief and trust and hope – a way through the darkness that sometimes surrounds us.

CONCLUSION

When the Spirit moves in us and through us, in our communities, in our church, we discover that doors open, that miracles begin to

happen, that things start to fall into place. In the last few years here at the Cathedral, we have frequently found ourselves in a corner, with closed doors – and all we could do was to ask the Spirit to show us the way, to pour out manna from heaven, to provide water in the desert. And wonder of wonders, doors have opened. The Red Sea has parted. We have found a way forward through the crisis. We have seen how the Lord has guided us.

Let's invite the Spirit to move in us again, afresh, this Pentecost – to give us new hope and strength; to give us a deep excitement to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Come Holy Spirit of God; move amongst us; move in us, move through us – send us out into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit to live and work to the praise and glory of God.