

Sunday Sermon Notes: Pentecost – 31st May 2020

From Rev Jilleen Chambers

Happy Birthday to the Church!

How are you holding on in this strange world of COVID-19: a place of exile and uncertainty and questions of the future? Importantly, are you still singing the song of the Lord in this strange land? I am looking and praying for the renewing breath of the Holy Spirit in the church – for renewed life in a valley of dry bones. Though restrictions are gradually easing, this Sunday marks ten weeks of lock-downs and exclusion from gathering as the Body of Christ. In Queensland, it is planned that Stage 2 easing of restrictions, when groups of up to 20 people can gather for worship, will happen on the 12th June. Hopefully, we may be able to have Sunday services on Sunday 14th June though I am still waiting on final directions from the diocese.

In this atmosphere of should we gather, will we gather, some people ask if it is essential for churches to open their doors for services. Many churches (apparently 74% of the diocese) have been doing online services with people logging in and watching online. For various reasons, I made the decision not to follow down this path and for our parish, more and more, I feel it was the right decision. For me, I feel as though part of me is missing when I don't have the opportunity to physically gather with my brothers and sisters in Christ.

When services do start, we will have to sanitise our hands and record the names and phone numbers of all who attend. Social distancing will reduce the number of people we can have in the church buildings – 16 in St Mary's and I suspect about 12 in St Matthias'. It is okay for couples and family groups to sit together and I ask people to be sensible about observing social distancing. If you are uncomfortable with being inside or more people arrive than can sit inside, we will turn on the outside speakers and people can sit under the tree at St Mary's or on the side verandah at St Matthias'. And no hand shaking or singing. Please keep praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and wisdom as we look towards the future and the end of the lock-down. Please let me know your thoughts about resuming church services – do you plan to attend?

This Sunday is the Day of Pentecost. Pentecost (from the Greek word for 50), also called the Festival of Weeks or Shavuot by the Jews, is 50 days after Passover (our Easter). It is a harvest festival that also came to celebrate the giving of the Ten Commandments (the Law) at Mt Sinai during the time of the Exodus from Egypt. For Jews of the first century, it was a time of pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship in the temple.

Christians celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the Church. Pentecost this year is very different from the day reported in the reading from Acts chapter 2. (I always feel sorry for the person doing this reading as there are many unfamiliar words – Cappadocia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, etc.) We think we live in confusing times but we are not alone. For the disciples, life must have been very confusing. They had thought Jesus would set Israel free from the Romans but instead, they had seen him crucified and three days later had met the resurrected Jesus in a locked room. Ten days before Pentecost, they had seen Jesus taken up into heaven and heard his promise to send the Holy Spirit – the other Advocate who would abide with them (John 14: 16-17, 26) we read about a couple of weeks ago. I wonder what the disciples expected to happen now?

On that first Pentecost, 120 people were gathered when the Holy Spirit came with wind and tongues of fire and they all began speaking in other tongues – in languages they hadn't learnt. Their lives would never be the same. The Book of Acts records that the thousands of pilgrims who thronged Jerusalem were amazed to hear the disciples speaking in their own languages – praising God and speaking about what God had done. These disciples, who had been hiding behind locked doors, were utterly transformed. Something wonderful happened that day! These frightened men and women were empowered to take the message of Jesus' saving death and resurrection to the whole world. Peter, who in fear had denied knowing Jesus, was emboldened and began to preach about Jesus with power and passion, and though some scoffed, others responded to his message and 3,000 people were baptized. Wouldn't we all like church growth like that? There is a church joke: Jesus promised a kingdom, and what we got was the Church. (Where you have people gathering, you need an organisation to organise how we live together.)

In the second reading (1 Corinthians 12: 4-11), Paul highlights that Spiritual gifts are given at the discretion of the Spirit and are not a badge of honour or spirituality. They aren't given for the benefit of the individual but to build up (for the common good) the whole Body of Christ. On the day of Pentecost, the gift of tongues given to the disciples convinced their hearers of the authenticity of what God was doing. In 1st Corinthians chapter 14: 14-15, Paul talks about the gift of tongues as being a prayer language. There are many other gifts of the Spirit – and we all have been given a gift to use to help build up the church – what is your gift?

On the day of Pentecost, the disciples' lives were turned upside down. The Book of Acts tends to focus on the wonder and strengths of the early church but did the coming of the Spirit solve all the disciples' problems? Did they immediately become super Christians in tune with God's plan or become perfect? No. Acts shows us that life for Jesus' followers was uncertain and full of danger. They were ridiculed, imprisoned and killed for preaching about Jesus. Paul was flogged, imprisoned, shipwrecked and later martyred. Stephen was stoned to death. All of the disciples, except John, were killed for their faith and John was exiled to the island of Patmos. And we also hear of dissension and bias among the disciples. Peter stopped eating with non-Jewish Christians as he was afraid of being accused by others who continued to keep the Jewish food laws. (Galatians 2: 11-14) (Old habit and beliefs can be hard to break even with the help of the Holy Spirit.)

Jesus does not promise us certainty or an easy life just because we follow him; and the coming of the Holy Spirit empowers us but does not solve our problems. (Sometimes it can seem like the opposite happens.) When we turn and follow Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we receive the gift of his forgiving love and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said it will flow like a river of living water from our hearts to bless us and all whom we meet. (John 7: 38) Our life will be changed as we walk in faith with the one who was crucified for us. Remember what happened to Jesus after he received the empowerment of the Holy Spirit at his baptism? He was sent into the desert for 40 days and three years later he was crucified. Should we expect anything different, to be easy? However, never, never forget that the one who was crucified for us, is the one who walks with us each day, strengthening and enabling us to live for him through the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is easy for us to forget that Jesus was 'criticised because he included everyone, ridiculed because he took sides with the vulnerable rather than powerful, rejected because he was not what people were expecting in a Messiah, and crucified in weakness and shame. And yet this is the One through whom God redeemed the world by communicating the life-giving news that God's love is large enough to include everyone and powerful enough to defeat even death. The apparent boldness of the Apostles witness, therefore, should never be divorced from the apparent weakness of the God who comes to suffer rather than wage war and who returns sin with mercy rather than judgment.' (David Lose, May 2020)

I pray that this Pentecost Hymn might be the prayer of our hearts:

O breath of life, come sweeping through us, revive your church with life and power;
O breath of life, come cleanse, renew us, and fit your church to meet this hour.

O wind of God, come bend us, break us, till humbly we confess our need;
then in your tenderness remake us, revive, restore: for this we plead.

O breath of love, come breathe within us, renewing thought and will and heart;
come, love of Christ, afresh to win us, revive your church in every part.

Revive us, Lord! Is zeal abating while harvest fields are vast and white?
Revive us, Lord, the world is waiting, equip your church to spread the light.

Blessing: May the Son of God enfold you with his Spirit and his love; may the Spirit lead you into all truth, giving you grace to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and to proclaim the wonderful works of God; and the blessing God almighty, the Father, our Creator, the Son, our Redeemer and the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Guide, be among you and remain with you always. Amen.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.