

Sermon - Pentecost event: Witnessing to the Good News

Based on the readings for Pentecost Sunday, Year A: Acts 2.1-21, John 20.19-23 (from the NRSV)

Filled with the Spirit's power

- Today we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost - which is effectively the birth of the Church.
- Although our primary source for this event is Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles, today's short Gospel passage from John's account implies, through Jesus' actions, this same outpouring of God's Spirit.
- In it, the resurrected Christ breathes on his disciples and says '*Receive the Holy Spirit.*'
- Jesus breathes upon us the breath of God - which is the Spirit of God.
- And he reminds us that, through the power of God's Spirit, we are enabled - empowered - to forgive sins, to remove from people's lives the things that come between them and God.
- Jesus also reminds us that we are accountable for exercising wise stewardship of this power, because it likewise enables us to *prevent* people from receiving God's blessing.
- Indeed, as Jesus said elsewhere: '*From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.*' (Luke 12.48)
- In giving us God's Spirit, Jesus is giving and entrusting us with much, and then expects us to be accountable with regard to how we use this spiritual power.

The Marks of Mission

- In a short while I'm going to explore the Pentecost reading itself, from the book *The Acts of the Apostles*.
- Scholars have suggested that the book be renamed more accurately *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*, since it is through the power of God's Spirit that followers of the Way of Jesus form themselves into groups, and become the Good News for their local communities.
- Before I explore details of the story, I want to provide some context for our particular faith community, here at St John the Divine Anglican Church, in Croydon, Victoria.
- As a parish in the Melbourne Diocese, we have signed up to the Diocesan Parish Renewal Program.
- Although we are still in the starting phase - which is being drawn out due to the COVID-19 regulations - it is helpful for us all to pay particular attention to the Five Marks of Mission, as defined by the world-wide Anglican Communion.
- These were originally articulated in 1984, and have been modified a few times since then.
- They are not supposed to be a final and complete statement about mission - however, they do provide a great framework for any church community to assess how they are being missional in character - how they are being the Good News for their local communities.
- After all, Christ's mission is the Church's mission, and choosing to be members of the Church - choosing to be Christians, to be followers of the Way of Jesus - means that we acknowledge that God gives us his Pentecost Spirit in order to continue the missional work of Jesus Christ.
- The **5 Marks of Mission** are:
 1. to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom;
 2. to teach, baptise and nurture new believers;
 3. to respond to human need by loving service;
 4. to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation; and
 5. to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

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- To help us engage more intentionally with these aspects of mission, and to register what these are for us more deeply, we are going to spend today and the next six Sundays working through stories from the Book of Acts, and seeing how the early church engaged with these Marks of Mission.
- And to help us with this, each parishioner is going to have the opportunity to access a study booklet called *Where Do We Go From Here?* - or to engage with material from this booklet.
- This study booklet has been produced by ABM - the Anglican Board of Mission in Australia - and we are currently working through the logistics of getting it, or a summary of it, to all parishioners during the next week.
- Next Sunday we will be celebrating Trinity Sunday as part of our standard liturgical calendar, and I will be extending today's focus into that observation - so we have two weeks to engage with today's Mark of Mission.

The first mark of Mission in the Pentecost story

- And this is the first Mark of Mission: **to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.**
- The study book rewrites it as: *Witness to Christ's saving, forgiving and reconciling love for all people.*
- Now let us return to today's reading from Acts, to the Pentecost event, to see how this first mark of mission plays out in that.
- One of the striking aspects of the story is the list of so many different nationalities represented in the gathered crowd.
- As Luke explains:
 - there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.*
- If this puzzles you, then it might help to understand that from the time of the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE, the Jewish people had been travelling to and settling in other parts of the Middle East and the Mediterranean.
- In fact, there were so many Greek-speaking Jews after Alexander the Great had established the Greek empire, that the Hebrew scriptures were officially translated into Greek two to three centuries before Christ, in a version called the Septuagint - the translation of the 70 (or 72), since supposedly 6 scholars from each of the twelve tribes were involved in it.
- So all these foreign Jews in Jerusalem would have spoken the language of their home countries - and therefore have been amazed to find themselves hearing their mother tongue.
- God's deeds of power were being told to them not only in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek, but in the languages that they were most comfortable with.

Personal language

- I wonder if you've ever experienced being in a situation where you didn't understand the language being spoken - or perhaps only with difficulty.
- And when somebody started translating or speaking to you in your own language, then experiencing a sense of relief and - most importantly - a sense of connection.
- *This* is what all these foreigners suddenly experienced - that *they* were being explicitly included, and that the stories were being told explicitly to *them*.
- That the Good News being shared was being intentionally shared with *them*.
- That *they* didn't need to make the hard effort to connect and understand, because - in this case - God's Spirit was enabling, empowering, the disciples to make the connection and to facilitate the understanding.
- Through the use of appropriate language - the language appropriate to the hearer rather than the speaker - the Good News was made personal to the listener.

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God's Kingdom is for everybody

- There is a fundamental theological point here - fundamental to *all* works of mission, to *all* sharing of the Good News of God's saving work through Jesus Christ.
- And that is that the kingdom of God is not reserved, not limited, to whoever the 'in-crowd' is.
- It was not limited to Hebrew- or Aramaic-speaking Jews living in Judea.
- It was not limited to the Pharisees or Sadducees of that time.
- And now it is still not reserved or limited to people who are already church-goers, or to particular Christian denominations, such as the Anglicans, or the Baptists, or the Catholics, or the Presbyterians.
- And Peter stands up and quotes, and even adjusts and interprets, the writings of the prophet Joel.
- He makes a point of saying that now is the time of 'the last days' - the 'last days' being a figure of speech which covers all time from that Pentecost event onwards -
- And in these 'last days' the privileging of one group over another is finally at an end.
- The kingdom of God is no longer the privilege of the religious elite - at that time older Jewish men with the financial means to be able to sit around discussing the Torah all the time.
- No. As Peter points out, God's Spirit was being poured out on *everybody*:
 - not only men, but on women, too;
 - not only the old, but on young people, too;
 - not only free citizens, but on slaves, too;
 - not only on Jews, but on *'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord'*.

The divine penny drops

- In one sense this was nothing different to what Jesus had been teaching, and what the disciples had been struggling to learn.
- But after the death and resurrection of Jesus - after meeting together day after day in prayer asking God what this all meant for them - it was like everything just went CLICK!
- Everything suddenly fell into place and made sense because they were no longer looking at it from a human perspective, but finally from the divine, the Godly, perspective - and God's Spirit was released in a new and powerful way.
- And the gathered crowds suddenly found themselves included, and spoken to, personally and directly.

How are we doing with the first mark?

- For any church community now to reflect on how they might be engaging in mission - for our own church community to reflect on this - it is relevant and appropriate to think about this first mark of mission, and to ask how are we - or how well are we - proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom?
- How well are we witnessing to Christ's saving, forgiving and reconciling love for all people?
- And the Pentecost story directs us to look and reflect on how well are we engaging with others with where they are, cutting through barriers of difference, in order to *be* the Good News to them -
- in order to act on God's Spirit that Jesus breathes on us too, so that we too can pronounce God's forgiveness of sin, and help remove the things that prevent people from being able to receive God's blessing.
- How much are people in our wider community finding themselves included in the Good News we share in?
- How much do they find themselves being spoken to, personally and directly, so that they want to hear more?
- When we try to do this in our own strength, it can be very very hard.

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- But when we pray, and keep praying, for the Pentecost Spirit to guide us, and encourage us, and enable us - we too might find that it's not so much the Spirit enabling us to witness, but rather us unblocking the Spirit to enable God's Spirit to witness through us.
- It's about partnering with the Holy Spirit - about allowing the Spirit to partner with us.
- And, next week, I'll explore this further when we come to celebrate Trinity Sunday.

Amen.