

Sermon Notes: Pentecost Sunday:

Acts 2:1-11; John 20:19-23

The English Cardinal Basil Hume wrote, “Pentecost is forever, now and always” and that is a great reminder to all of us. When we celebrate the feast today, we should remember that we are not merely commemorating something that happened some two thousand years ago. We are celebrating something that is continuing to happen in the world around us as God works away to transform the world through the mission and ministry of his only Son.

But, you might well say, if the Spirit has been working away for so long, what are the signs of that work? And that is a good question. I guess the easiest answer is that the Church is still here! When you look back over two thousand years of Church history, with all of the highs and the lows, you cannot help but reach the point where you say that something divine has been at work or else it would have torn itself apart by now or simply been absorbed along with so many other movements and philosophies. The difference is that the Church is no mere philosophical movement. It is the Body of Christ in the world and it is that divine dimension that needs to be kept in mind at all times, particularly in these difficult times.

The First Reading from Acts:

When we read the story of Acts, we should remember that Luke was writing to strengthen his embattled communities. He was not merely writing history or an eye witness account of what might have gone on in that isolated room. He was trying to strengthen a Church that was going through difficult times. There were a growing number of martyrdoms, a great deal of pressure and even persecution from the Jewish authorities; the Temple had been destroyed and the Christians were in so many places barred from the synagogues. As we see from Paul’s writings, there were divisions within the Churches and it must have seemed that the life of a disciple was one of great perplexity.

Then along comes Luke and as shepherd to the people, he set out to not just reassure them but to strengthen them and to challenge them into action. Hence his Gospel and the work of the Book of Acts.

The Twelve were gathered together in that room, with the Twelve representative of the universal Church, wondering what was going to happen. What do you think was going on in their minds? It was probably a mixture of fear and anxiety, despair and pain, a parade of past memories and through it all a little bit of hope and expectation. They were in a hostile city, a city where their master had been arrested, tried and crucified. They were an “at risk” group and what happened to Jesus could well happen to themselves.

They had just experienced the ascension and the promises that came with it and that would have been in their minds along with the fears and anxieties. And so they waited. And they waited.

Then the house rocked and was filled with light. A strong wind blew and they noticed tongues of fire resting above each other’s head and heard their fellow apostles speaking in a variety of strange and different languages. What was going on?

We need to keep in mind what Luke is trying to say rather than to try and decipher what might or might not have happened on that first Pentecost day. The symbols are clear:

First of all there was noise and wind. In the Old Testament there were numerous examples of this kind of phenomenon and we call them *Theophanies* which is a Greek word for God noises. The ancients believed that God could not come into a room and everything remain the same. Something had to change because of the very nature of God. Change happened, not because a person believed God was present, but because God was truly present. And the wind that went along with the noise, not only reminds us of the first covenant on Mt Sinai during the Exodus but is a metaphor for the activity of God. Remember the story of the crossing the Red Sea, for example. The writers tell us in one of the accounts that a strong wind blew all night and dried up the waters, allowing the Hebrews to cross dry shod. Luke is saying to us, here at the start of his

story that what is going to unfold in the rest of the book stands under the activity of God. All that happens to the Church, happens not because of the strength of those first believers but because of the power of God which is at work in them. The God noises tell us something divine is happening here.

This is followed up with the image of the fire. The fire comes in the form of tongues and is related to the gift of speech that is given to the Apostles but it has other messages as well. Fire does two things. It cleanses and it lights. When Ezekiel was called to take up his prophetic ministry his tongue was cleansed by a hot coal, burning away his sin and selfishness, his personal weaknesses and limitations. And so with the Church. To be a disciple means a willingness to be cleansed so that the voice that is heard is not that of the disciple but the voice of God himself. They will speak not with their own tongues but with the tongue of Jesus Christ who was sent by the Father to preach the Good News.

And the light. What God did at the beginning of creation was to push back the oppressive forces of darkness that overwhelmed the earth so that creation could take place. Such creation needed light. When the Father sent his Son into the world, he sent him to be the light of the world, a light shining in the darkness, a light that the darkness would never overcome.

And so it is here. We have a new creation beginning in Jesus and that work of re-creating the earth takes up anew with the empowering and the sending out of the Twelve. They are filled with light, overshadowed with light and sent to be lights on a hill top. Their ministries will be characterized by light.

Having been purified by the fire from heaven and filled with the presence of Almighty God, they can now preach and teach the Good News of Salvation to the nations - each in their own language.

The change in the Apostles was instantaneous. Instead of cowering in a tiny room in the middle of the city, they went out into the town and began to preach Jesus dead and crucified and called all men and women to believe in him as Lord and Messiah. That transformation brought them from worrying about their own lives and struggling under the limitation of their own understanding and resources to believing and trusting in the work of God that was in them and through them. What happens in the next twenty-six chapters of the Acts, happens because they allow God to do it.

The Gospel of John:

That reading from the Acts sets the tone for today's Gospel reading. The key phrase here is: *As the Father sent me, so am I sending you.* It does not get any scarier than that! We are called and commissioned by Jesus to do exactly what he was called and commissioned by the Father to do. His mission is our mission. His ministry is to be our ministry. His way of life is to be our way of life and his way of dying is to be our way of dying. It is all a bit too difficult if we want to take this passage seriously.

And, of course, that was Luke's problem. He understood all too well what was being asked of those who wished to be disciples of Jesus. He also knew the obstacles and the problems and had seen and heard all of the excuses for inaction. He was probably as tempted as his fellow believers to take the easy options and live the Gospel when and where it was easy. But he knew that was not possible if one wanted to be a disciple.

Luke, by the time he got around to writing his Gospel and the story of the Acts knew that the biggest need his faithful people had was to be reassured that the future of the Church rested not in their own hands nor in the hands of their fellow believers. If the Church was to survive and grow it was going to need a steading, guiding and empowering hand from above. It needed a Divine advocate and protector, a divine guide and heavenly power and a lot more than could be found in all the strength and resources of those early Christians.

What Luke was telling his people was that when Jesus said he would not leave them orphans, he meant exactly that. When he promised that he would be with them until the end of the world, he meant that as well. And when he told them that the gates of hell would not prevail against them, that too was in the true basket. There was nothing they need fear apart from their own inaction. Everything they did as Church rested on what God was doing in them and through them. If they were to live in that way, all would be well.

Conclusion:

When I look around the Church today, I do not see a Church very different to the time of Luke. We too are a Church struggling to survive in the midst of the world that is at best indifferent to our message and at worst which persecutes us in a variety of ways. We too are a Church struggling to hold ourselves together, a Church torn by divisions and selfishness and a Church all too often succumbing to the temptations to compromise our message and our faith for the sake of peace.

We are also a Church which looks around at the problems which beset us and are tempted to give in, to simply let things tick along as they have always been in the hope that we at least might see out our days in the Church we have always known. We are a Church that is tempted to think that spending more and more time on our own internal workings and our internal problems is much easier than tackling the Gospel command to go out to the poor and the marginalized and that it is easier to address the Gospel to those already convinced rather than try and preach it to those who do not believe and are perhaps even hostile.

Yes, our Church today is no different to that first Church. And, we also have that same gift of the Holy Spirit to see us through all of these limitations. As Basil Hume said, "Pentecost is forever, now and always". Pentecost is for us here in the Diocese of Ballarat. That power to change and transform is as much a part of our lives as a Church as it was for the Church of Luke and those early New Testament communities. The only difference is our willingness to live as though the Spirit was at work and to believe that the Spirit is at work. While we look at ourselves and our limitations, nothing will change. When we move forward into the difficulties, confident that we go with the Spirit to be our guide and our hope, then our Church will change.

May this Pentecost see us filled with hope and confidence and engage in missionary vocations empowered by God's Holy Spirit.

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