

The Same God

Is it really 50 days since Easter? I'm afraid it is, the Easter garden has gone, the Paschal candle has burnt down, far more than I was expecting to be honest, and you can now relax, no more sprinkling with Holy Water at the beginning of the service. The world has moved on quickly too; the Easter break is a very distant memory. And whilst we have kept Eastertide, and then Ascensiontide Easter has gradually slipped away from us, bringing us to Pentecost, that strange feast that somehow marks an end and a beginning, slightly distant and different from Easter. Except that it isn't really, it is all part of the one and the same series of events that begins with the Annunciation and culminates in the outpouring of the Spirit today. And I'd like us to use one phrase of St Paul in our second reading to help us frame this feast today, that is "it is the same God."

It is far too easy to conceive of Pentecost as something completely random, an add on before we get back to normal life. When, in fact, it is rooted in and is the natural outcome of all that we have just celebrated.

In some ways we have two accounts of Pentecost this morning: the extrovert's version in Luke's account in Acts and the introvert's version in John's gospel.

Luke's account is set 10 days after Ascension and 50 days after Easter; John's is on Easter day itself. Luke's account is extraordinary and spectacular; John's is as simple as breathing. But both tell us the same thing.

John has had Jesus preparing the disciples for the sending of the Spirit in the Farewell Discourse, the chapters we have been hearing the last few Sundays, and he doesn't have them wait any longer than the evening of Easter Day. Jesus appears in the upper room and before anything else gives them his peace, in the way that only he can, he shows them his hands and his feet, "these are the signs of a peace that can cope with fear. Suffering and death do not have the last word. Whatever the fear, even if it is of people or events that really can cause suffering and death there is a peace that is greater. [It] is embodied in Jesus, crucified and risen, it is freely given as a blessing in greeting, and the Spirit who rested on him and led him to the cross, is about to be shared with the disciples."¹ The giving of the Spirit, the same Spirit that rested on Jesus is rooted in the cross and the resurrection.

¹ David Ford, *The Gospel of John: a theological commentary*, pp.403-404

And then John has Jesus simply breathe on the disciples, something so natural and yet so full of meaning. As usual in John's gospel we are supposed to be reminded of the Prologue, "in the beginning was the Word," which in turn reminds us of creation, the breathing of life into creation by God. We hear echoes of God breathing life into the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision in the valley, and the wider promises in Ezekiel of God putting the Spirit into the people. Jesus, crucified and risen, breathes new life into the disciples. "[They] receive the Spirit of the crucified and risen Jesus, infusing them with the reality of his life, death, and resurrection, inspiring them to be sent as he was sent."²

The same Spirit, the same mission of proclaiming forgiveness and release. It's the first time John has talked about forgiveness in the gospel, it is clearly essential to the mission of the disciples as they receive the Spirit to be sent "as the Father has sent me, so I send you." The Spirit transforms the disciples into individuals and a community that is to continue the same mission of the crucified and risen Christ.

² *ibid*, p.405

Other than the details, John and Luke are on the same page. Luke has consistently throughout the gospel brought the Spirit into play, it is the Spirit who is active in Mary's conception creating life; it is the Spirit who is upon Jesus as he begins his mission; it is the Spirit who the disciples are to wait for so that they can be sent as witnesses.

Pentecost was one of three great pilgrimage feasts of Judaism, the Feast of Weeks, or the feast of the first fruits. There is something in the Jewish understanding of this being the day that the law was given, the key to how the people of God would live. Luke might be wanting us to see this as the day that a new way of living is given to the people of God. There's much to distract us here: fire, wind, noise. But Luke isn't concerned with the "pyrotechnics of theophany"³ rather he too is concerned with transformation, the spiritual transformation of the disciples.

Which is exactly where Paul is in his letter to the Corinthians. Now I know most of you were hoping that we'd quietly forget our second reading, with its talk of gifts and strange ones at that, ones that our liturgy and often our

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p.45

theology don't make room for. But we are not let off the hook so easily. Paul too is writing about transformation, his point being that the Corinthians are not being transformed, they're stuck in their selfish and inward-looking ways. The gifts that were supposed to be used for the building up of the body of Christ, as the author to the Ephesians puts it, are being used for personal spiritual power. But Paul wants them to see the bigger picture, he wants them to see that the gift that every person has, and he's very clear that every person has something, is from the same God. "Present in the Christian these gifts are the means by which God acts within the community."⁴

It is the same God that gives the different gifts, the same God that sends us as witnesses that equips us, the same God that calls each of us to serve. Paul uses the Body of Christ as the imagery of interdependence and mutuality. He uses allusions to baptism and the eucharist to remind us of the rootedness of our lives in the Spirit infused sacramentality of our life with God. And because of that we do not have the option of writing off these gifts just because we might not understand them or see them regularly in action. To each is given, Paul says.

⁴ Raymond Collins, *First Corinthians*, p.450

For Luke and John there is a simple command **Receive!** It is God's initiative to give; it is ours to receive. For Paul it is God's gifts that are the signs of the Spirit alive and working in us individually and as a community. The same God, Paul says, gives different gifts.

The same God, the same Spirit who was at work in Jesus Christ, in his death and resurrection is at work in us. That is supposed to bring us peace and unsettle us. The same God whose plan has always been to bring reconciliation to a broken and divided world gives us that same mission. The same God that worked through Jesus Christ works through us.

We had a conversation at PCC on Monday evening about gifts, and the thing that was most clear is that we are uncomfortable talking about them! Even hesitant in acknowledging them. But the truth is God has given them to us, for a purpose. They may not be the ones Paul lists here, and it's not an exhaustive list, or they might be. But they have given and our invitation is to receive them.

Which is why there is perhaps more symbolism in today's liturgy than normal. We will light our candles from the very much reduced Paschal Candle that has

burnt in every service since Easter and then extinguish it. Not because we go back to how we were before, but because the truth of the resurrection, of forgiveness, of life with God is too big to be held in here and needs to be proclaimed out there, by us. By the way we live, the way we serve, and the way we witness.

And we are also offering anointing with Chrism oil this morning. The oil that symbolises the setting apart of each of us for a specific work only you can do. We might not know what that is yet, but we can be anointed as an act of being open to it. We might know what it is and have been running from it, this morning we can stop running and offer ourselves. Or we might know exactly what it is and be ready to move forward. Whatever it is it can be a moment to receive what God has promised to give.

The same God, the same Jesus, the same Spirit that we read about in our Scriptures, is here this morning offering the gift of transformation, the gift of the peace that comes through the crucified and resurrected Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is up to us to receive.