

## **Sermon on Pentecost Sunday, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2019**

**By Reverend Canon David Hodgson, Rector of All Saints Church, Wokingham**

*Readings: Acts 2.1-21; John 14.8-17,25-27*

There was a time last week, with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, for remembering rightly those who made the sacrifice of their lives to defeat the Nazi forces and bring an end to the deadly outrages of that cruel regime. Now that moment has been observed and due honour made; with the arrival of Pentecost Sunday we are invited to raise our heads once more to the present reality and to the horizon of the future; to God's presence with us now and God's promises enduring; to look beyond our own island, even our own continent, and across the whole world for which Christ died.

Two, three, even four new generations of humanity have been born or are coming to birth now since 1944 – the population of the world has trebled since then - and each one may rightly be praised as the greatest generation in one way or another. So many new struggles and costly sacrifices have been made for causes of freedom and human dignity in the last 75 years in so many parts of the world – struggles against Soviet oppression; against apartheid in South Africa; against Chinese repression of minorities; against terrorist extremists who claim their religion whether Muslim, Christian, Buddhist or Hindu as justification for violence; against many dictatorial or corrupt regimes across the world; against the destruction of whole peoples, species, and precious habitats in the name of economic growth. In every succeeding generation and in many different areas of our common home the earth, greatness has been called forth in men and women by the need to stand up for truth, and to strive sacrificially in compassion and respect for those in danger, in the face of corrupt power and insatiable greed. Many have lost their lives whether in the uniformed service of their country or community or as civilians advocating for justice or defending the vulnerable.

Continuing my theme here of greatness in every generation across the whole of humanity in these days: as well as those we honour whose greatness has consisted in the courage and willingness to risk their life itself; we have so many other examples of greatness of heart, imagination, vision and dedication – those who have given of all their care and skill, often at greater cost to themselves than at first appeared, to opening up new perspectives on life through science and the arts; to revealing new truths of knowledge and experience; who have worked to make heard the voices and experiences of new people and groups of people who were previously shunned or ignored; who work to build up, rather than tear down, the possibilities of flourishing for all people.

What has this all to do with Pentecost when we celebrate the promised gift of the Holy Spirit of God? We sometimes confine our thinking about the Spirit of God to churchy things like worship services; or think that God's Spirit can work only amongst those who acknowledge and name God. But in the witness of the Bible and Christian experience we see the Spirit of God is the Spirit of love and wisdom wherever these are to be found flourishing; that God's Spirit is ceaselessly at work in the world calling and empowering people everywhere to realise God's kingdom of justice and peace and compassion for all.

Psalm 104 talks about God's Spirit renewing the face of the earth. This was originally a reference to the annual re-appearance of plant life and harvest after the winter months. But since then the idea has been taken up as a metaphor for the renewing of human community which Christ's resurrection and gift of the Spirit brings. Today in our Anthropocene age, in which we see human life and the destiny of the earth intimately intertwined, the idea of the Holy Spirit renewing the face of the earth takes on a new significance. It is a vision of the fulfilment of God's promise for our world which includes the whole of creation; not only the human world but also the physical, the plant, and the animal worlds. It is a holistic vision; aware that we are created beings like the other creatures with whom we share this planet and that we live together or we do not live at all – aware that we are part and parcel of a much larger reality than we can see or perhaps ever know – trillions of neutrinos, the elementary particles, are passing through our bodies every second

invisibly, and trillions of microscopic organisms are alive in our bodies – we live in a complex interconnectivity.

Notice what Saint Peter said on that Day of Pentecost when he spoke to the amazed and questioning crowd: this is a fulfilment, of ancient prophecies, in other words, a culmination, a coming to fruition of God's love as much as a new beginning. So, for Saint Peter the event marked the beginning of the final act in the great drama of God's creation and recreation of the world. Practically the opening words of his speech are a quotation from the prophet Joel: In these last days I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh ... and later in the quotation from Joel ..the portents in heaven and signs on the earth below -show the holistic scope of what Peter believes is happening when the Spirit comes – it is a renewal of the whole earth.

Last Sunday we were delighted to welcome and hear from Archbishop Winston who brought to us his message of both challenge and hope about the realities of climate change. The challenge is that we have already caused the degradation of the earth's atmosphere and oceans by using fossil fuels – the impact is serious, and we need to take action now. For us as Christian people the hope is that the gift of the Spirit of Christ makes possible reconciliation and unity. One of the key messages Archbishop Winston had for us is that the challenge of renewing and healing the earth is a challenge for human community – of realising unity, listening to each other's needs and responding to those needs, ensuring the voices of the weak and the vulnerable are heard and their flourishing is made possible and not ignored whilst some like us continue to live lives of heedless luxury by comparison.

On that day of Pentecost all the people heard the message about God in their own languages. This is a reversal of the ancient story of the tower of Babel – the first urban-industrial project in the bible. So the gift of the Holy Spirit sets up a new pattern of communication – one which overcomes the barriers to understanding and respect built up by pride and arrogance, which human efforts tend to lapse into when the transforming grace of the Spirit is absent. That first Christian day of Pentecost was a setting right and a restoration to wholeness of the twisted and deformed body which human community had become - parts which had become unable to communicate with one another were now returned into a shared conversation and this was to be the conversation of love - love for one another as Christ has loved us.

Rowan Williams has written about what happened at Pentecost like this:

“When Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as the “promise of the Father” that is going to descend on the world he's speaking of the way in which the gift of the Holy Spirit of God enables us not only to be a new kind of being but to see human beings afresh and hear them differently. When the Holy Spirit sweeps over us in the wind and the flame of Pentecost the Holy Spirit gives us the life of Jesus.. (his) capacity to hear what is really being said by human beings. It gives us the courage not to screen out those bits of the human world that are difficult, unpleasant, those are not edifying. It opens our eyes and our ears and our hearts to the full range of what being human means....we feel the edge, the ache in human anger and in human suffering. And we recognise that it can be taken *into* Christ and *into* the heart of the Father. It can be healed. It can be transfigured.” These are words from his book Being Human (2018, p109, 110).

At Pentecost we celebrate this most wonderful gift which God has presented to everyone who receives; the holy gift of the Spirit of Jesus, of love and wisdom. This Holy Spirit is, as we declare in our creed, the Lord and Giver of life – every form of life on this planet is sustained by God's Spirit. May this Spirit, the truth peace and love of Jesus Christ set loose into the world through his church bring healing and reconciliation in our own lives, and empower us to share these with others; and so renew the face of the earth.

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