

Sunday 11 May 2008
The Day of Pentecost
Acts 2: 1-21 John 20: 19-23

Canon Chris Burdon — Pentecostal Questions!

All over England new councils and new mayors are taking up their duties. They do so after voluminous planning. To get to this stage there are manifestos and consultations and focus groups. There are negotiations and working parties. There are press releases, strategies, reports and debates. So much organisation goes into bringing the new administration to birth.

So what about the institution born at this festival of Pentecost in Jerusalem in about the year 29? We've heard the story. And it's plain that by modern political standards the forward planning and the execution of this great event were atrocious. There was no strategic thinking and no real constitution. Just twelve rather undistinguished men, and they clearly weren't in control. If they had a message they could hardly get it across, for they weren't even speaking a common language. They were taken for drunkards.

Not much future for that movement, you'd think. And then a fisherman starts speaking with amazing eloquence and boldness. Such boldness that – as is well known – the game of cricket was born by divine inspiration: Peter stood up with the eleven and was bold. Sadly, St Luke didn't quite write those words, even if he should have done. And indeed he *could* have done; for the boldness, the knowledge, the imagination and the practical effects of Peter's speech are amazing.

Why all that chaos, that wind and fire, that babble of languages? They show, says Peter, that these are the last days. Something decisive is happening, world-destroying and world-creating. Unfortunately, our reading stopped abruptly after Peter's opening flourish. He goes on to speak about Jesus of Nazareth, the man who had been crucified a few weeks ago but whom God had raised up. This isn't fantasy, says Peter: we saw him, just as you've heard those tongues. 'Know then', he concludes, 'that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.'

There's a wild response to his words. Three thousand people are baptised, and the story of Jesus spreads far beyond the twelve men. And according to that triumphant story in the Acts of the Apostles, the story and the movement it gives birth to spread and spread and spread. The diverse languages are a sign right at the beginning that this movement can't be contained in Jerusalem or in Jewish tradition. It is to be universal, or catholic.

As the mission unfolds and the Church spreads, it grows from a movement into an institution. Not long before it starts planning for the future. Not long before it has structures and synods, chapters and working parties.

Does that mean the movement loses its soul? Well, let's not get romantic or resentful about this. The change from movement to institution is inevitable, with any growing human organisation. So in a sense we can never *fully* 'recapture that first fine careless rapture' of Pentecost.

There have of course been plenty of attempts to do so, to undo history and re-create the world of the first Christians - which is hardly surprising considering the terrible mistakes and false trails the Church has taken at various times, or considering the way an institution can lose energy and grow stale. Some of those attempts have called themselves 'pentecostal' or 'charismatic' and have celebrated again the gifts of the Spirit, including the gift of tongues. They have brought tremendous new enthusiasm and growth into the Church in the past century.

But it's seriously misleading if only one part of the Church or only one kind of worship is thought of as 'pentecostal' or 'charismatic'. If the Church, the whole Church, is *not* pentecostal and charismatic, then it is nothing – or rather, it's a religious institution which is denying its origins in wind and fire. It may be successful and established, it may be well-planned and efficiently ordered. But if it has forgotten Pentecost, then it *has* lost its soul.

For the Spirit's gifts (*charismata*, they are called in the NT, hence our word 'charismatic'), the Spirit of God, the wind and the fire, they relativise all our planning and our structures. However worthy those may be, they can be blown down or burnt up if the Spirit of God is about. Wind and fire are powerful forces, destructive forces, and there they are, right at the birth of the Christian movement, moving, changing and purging.

In St John's different version of Pentecost, which we heard in our Gospel reading, there is the same effect, though it's all more compressed. The eleven men don't wait fifty days. The wind, the Spirit of God, is there on the very day of resurrection, as Jesus breathes on them and says, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' Those who have been baptised, those who have received the Spirit, are inevitably missionaries – sent out to join in that same work of changing and purging. Easter and Pentecost make that inescapable.

Well, if we are missionaries, *where* are we sent? How do we plan our route? But aren't those the wrong questions – whether for those of you who were confirmed here with the Spirit last Sunday or for those who have been trying to live the way of Jesus for many decades? The fire cannot be controlled, and the wind may change direction. The language we are familiar with may be translated into new tongues, the customs or the images or the buildings we cherish may be remoulded or abandoned or overwhelmed by new discoveries, new gifts of the Spirit. We can't say at the outset, any more than Peter could.

All of which is not to say that there is no place for planning. It's not to say that there is no place for structures or traditions, or that institutions as such are wrong and outmoded. God's Spirit can blow anywhere, even in church planning committees. But – certainly for somebody like myself, belonging to a diocesan staff and a cathedral chapter, spending more time than perhaps is healthy in meetings and conferences and report-writing – there is the constant, the daily requirement to ask of all that we plan or undertake:

- Is this allowing the Spirit of God to blow where it will and send us to new places, or is it building walls to hold it in - however elegant the walls?
- Is this allowing the fire of the Spirit to leap up and purge our tired world, or is it throwing water on it - however fragrant the water?

I suggest that these pentecostal questions are ones not just for church officials like me. They are for all of us who have heard the story of Jesus and received the gift of the Spirit. For all of us and for the whole Church, then, let me close with a Pentecost prayer that I found in my e-mail inbox on Friday:

O Holy Spirit, giver of light and life, free us from all that is matter-of-fact, stale, bored, tired; all that takes things for granted. Open our eyes to see, and excite our minds to marvel. Amen.

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