

DAY OF PENTECOST – 19th May 2013 at Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle 7.00am
Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist with Procession Readings: Acts 2:1-21;
Psalm 104:26-36; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17 (25-27)

Pentecost is often called the “birthday” of the church. The church is born on Pentecost by the activity of the Spirit. What do we need to have church? Prayer books, greeters, musicians, buildings, microphones, rosters, good numbers?

On the day of Pentecost they had none of those things. Jesus had been crucified, buried, raised and ascended into heaven. Before his ascension, Jesus told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Holy Spirit.

There weren't many of them. The twelve grew to seventy, then to about 120. After Jesus was ascended they went back to Jerusalem to the upper room. Jesus' mother Mary was with them, and we're told they were “constantly devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). Today's reading from Acts tells us that “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place” (2:1). That's the first thing. It may seem so basic it's hardly worth mentioning.

On the first Easter Sunday, the risen Christ appeared to the disciples. Thomas missed out simply because he didn't show up. Woody Allen said 80% of success in life is just showing up. The opening section of our liturgy is called *Gathering in God's name*. How and why we gather is important. We don't gather just to be together or in the same way people gather for a football match or a concert or a fireworks display. Our gathering is different.

First, the disciples gathered for prayer. The church's first order of business is prayer. This is why every synod begins with a celebration of the Eucharist. This is why every day of the year in this Cathedral before anything else, we pray.

When Rowan Williams was Archbishop of Canterbury, he was asked how he was able to continue leading day by day with the controversies that threatened to tear apart the Anglican Communion. He acknowledged, “Of course it's eroding and exhausting.” But then he said, “It helps enormously to have not only the discipline of the daily offices, the daily Eucharist here [at Lambeth Palace] but actually a praying community. Prayers are offered quite early. Every morning, therefore, I have an opportunity to remind myself that what matters is not the Church of England or the Anglican Communion but the act of God in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. When I am inclined to think that the whole thing is falling apart and that I'm making a more than usually bad job of it, the transforming thing has got to be, and in my experience always is, renewing a sense of gratitude. Whether the Church of England survives or not, whether the Archbishop of Canterbury survives or not, Christ still died on the cross and rose again, and that's enough to keep you going for quite a few lifetimes.”

We do the same here: pray the daily office and recall the saving acts of God in Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist. We too have a praying community – a small one – that gathers to pray every day. Many parish communities are characterised either by frenetic activity or tiredness and exhaustion. If the Church prayed together more, not as a tired obligation but as a joyful opportunity, we may have more divine energy for our ministry.

The usual excuse given for not praying is “I’m too busy.” Years ago I read a book by Bill Hybels called *Too Busy Not to Pray*. Martin Luther said he had so much to do each day that he couldn’t get through it without spending the first three hours in prayer. John Wesley at the age of 83 complained that he couldn’t write more than fifteen hours a day without his eyes hurting. His work was fuelled by hours spent in prayer every day. I once heard that he said any minister who didn’t spend at least four hours a day in prayer shouldn’t be a member of the clergy, which disqualifies me straight away!

We’re not talking about prayer marathons here. Rather, ask yourself, what’s uppermost in my mind when I arrive here on a Sunday (or any day)? Is it activity, rosters, duties, jobs, tasks, the building, the people? Or is it God? When you enter the door does your hand reach out to pick up a bulletin, to shake someone else’s or to dip your fingers in the holy water stoop and make the sign of the cross or to light a candle? Nothing at all wrong with any of those other things, but just maybe asking ourselves such questions can help focus our minds.

Our first impulse is doing rather than being. Anglican mystic and solitary Martha Reeves who writes under the name Maggie Ross, says, “It is only in stillness that we become aware of what is unacknowledged and unconverted in us.” Maybe it’s more comfortable and less threatening to keep busy than slow down and hear the still small voice.

Second, there was disruption. Down through the years many people have said to me the main blessing they receive from coming to church is a sense of peace. I experience it myself. Peace is one of the fruits of the Spirit in our lives. But the peace of God is not, like the peace the world gives, an escape from the storms and stresses of life. It’s peace in the midst of them. Think of Jesus asleep in the boat in the middle of a storm.

On the day of Pentecost there was the rush of a violent wind; the house shook and the place was set on fire. A crowd gathered outside to see what was going on. They accused the disciples of being drunk. One of the main reasons the American sitcom *Cheers* was so highly rated and popular – it ran for 11 years – was expressed in the show’s theme song, “Where everybody knows your name.” It’s a shame a close sense of community and a spirit of joy is often more characteristic of a bar than the church gathered for worship.

In my last Parish someone said to me after making her Cursillo that it was the first experience she’d had of real community. What an indictment on the church! One shouldn’t have to go to a special weekend event to experience that. It should be the normal everyday experience for us as the church.

We live in a society where we don't look at each other anymore. Walk down the street. No-one looks at any one else. And of course, we're helped by all these little technological marvels we carry with us. So if someone's coming we can immediately look down and retreat into our private little world and escape having to acknowledge the other person. When people come to church they should be noticed. Last week I attended the Diocesan clergy retreat at Kincumber. The Conductor was Fr Roger Sharr. He related an incident from the time he was in parish ministry. In one particular parish the greeting of peace at the Sunday Eucharist took such a long time. He mentioned this one Sunday to the congregation, reminding them that the greeting of peace was not an opportunity to catch up with friends or a meet-and-greet time, but a liturgical act signifying our oneness in Christ and so on. He said it made no difference at all; the greeting of peace still went on as long as it had before. A woman came up to him after the service and said, "Do you know, the greeting of peace in our church is the only time in my week when someone looks at me or touches me?" No one should be invisible in church.

The crowd asked, "What do we have to do to be a part of this?" Of course the addition of new people creates disruption. Later we read that a spirit of generosity broke out. No-one had any needs because they held all things in common. No financial problems there.

Finally, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (v. 4). *When we're possessed of the Spirit of God our tongues are loosed*. Suddenly we're healed of our spiritual lockjaw and we start talking: in our singing, in our praying, in our witnessing, and in our listening. The channels of communication are unblocked. People start talking confidently about their faith and to each other instead of about each other.

That's what we need to have the church born in our midst. The Spirit and the Church are not the result of our earnest compulsive efforts. They're a gift of God's grace. The way we receive a gift is simply to hold our hands and receive. We will do that in a few moments as we come to the altar. Basically all we have to do is what the disciples did in obedience to the Lord's command: show up, and then wait.

Fr Mark Watson
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