

Pentecost Sunday

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 4 June 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost A

Acts 2: 1-21; Gospel: John 20: 19-23: Contemporary Reading: “*This grace that scorches us: a blessing for Pentecost Day*” by Jan Richardson

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

Wind and flames and the dissonance of diverse languages! A ragged remnant of disciples becoming the church! This is the Day of Pentecost.

The biblical stories, full of drama and symbolism, were recorded years after the death of Jesus. They were told among the early Christians as identity stories which assured women and men of a minority faith that God was with them, that who Jesus had been, was now a reality open to them as a community.

Today we heard two different biblical stories of the first Pentecost experience. One from Acts and one from John’s gospel. Each is told with expansive, descriptive power to catch us up in the moment of assurance and recognition that is at the heart of Pentecost. They are stories to inspire us, just as the early disciples were inspired and empowered by them.

The story told by Luke, the accepted author of The Book of Acts, is dramatic:

- A heavenly sound like that of a rushing wind.
- Descending fire, appearing as tongues of flame.
- Patterns of speech transformed, allowing everyone to hear and understand what was being said in all different kinds of languages.
- A moment of conversion and transformation, resulting in thousands of people being added to that small community of faith.
- All of this happening 50 days after the resurrection, on the Jewish Festival of Weeks, which commemorated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The story told by the author of John’s gospel is personal and intimate. This version of the story comes, not after fifty days, but immediately after the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to Mary.

It tells of the Spirit of God being breathed into the disciples by the risen Christ.

A promise of peace and the power to forgive, which we live out each week as we pass the peace to one another. As we exercise Jesus’ mandate of forgiveness, we receive the Holy Spirit, generating love and compassion as we greet each other with the ancient words: *Peace be with you.*

We should not try to combine or reduce these different stories into a simple chronological narrative, but rather mine each of them for the insight and inspiration that they offer as we consider who we are as the church, as followers of the way of Jesus, accompanied by the Spirit's power.

Ever since these stories first began to be told, this day has been regarded as a moment of possibility in the life of the church because of the presence with us of the enlivening, emboldening Spirit.

The Spirit has often been represented as a dove. The dove links to other Biblical stories.

It was a dove bearing an olive branch that flew back to Noah after the flood, signalling the good news of dry land and the possibility of life beyond the confines of the Ark.

We are told that the Spirit of God descended "like a dove" upon Jesus at his baptism.

In medieval times, I read last night, some churches had a circular hole in the roof, known as the Holy Ghost hole. Rose petals symbolising flames might be dropped through it at Pentecost, and doves lowered through it. However, apparently, the practice of releasing doves was discontinued when the doves rained more than light and grace down on the congregation!

From the Iona community, founded by George MacLeod, has come the suggestion that in Celtic traditions the Spirit was represented not by a docile dove, but by a wild goose. The accuracy of MacLeod's claim has been contested but the wild goose has captured the imagination of many Christians who have embraced an earth-centred, Celtic, understanding of Christian faith.

If doves were a hazard to the congregation, just imagine the chaos that geese could cause. (I don't think they practised that particular aspect with geese!)

Celtic Christians chose the Wild Goose as a way to talk about the Spirit because they felt that the untamed, uncontrollable, erratic nature of the Wild Goose more closely characterized the movement of the Spirit. A Wild Goose is always on the move, doing unexpected things; it is loud, passionate, sometimes frightening, and certainly unsettling – more like an Ibis than a dove.

Scholars might be historically accurate when they say there is no evidence to substantiate such a tradition in Celtic folklore beyond the creative imagination of George Macleod in the mid twentieth century on the island of Iona...but even if it is a recent claim, the Wild Goose has resonance and power as we discern what Divine Presence looks like, feels like - how it encounters us in our time and place.

This Spirit shouts a truth that many with power would rather not hear. And it often forces those on whom it rests to become noisy, passionate, and courageous people of the gospel.

The Acts Pentecost story encourages us to look for Divine Presence made known in unexpected places, with unexpected people. It reminds us of the surprise, bewilderment, and astonishment that rattles our bones when the Spirit of God has descended upon us. And I love the way that the Wild Goose image of the Spirit of God draws us into community and into relationship.

By creating a holy mess of confusion, the Spirit leaves us with just two choices: one, that we could give up and remain confused, or the other, that we could work together to find meaning. For me that commitment to work together to find meaning, and then hopefully to live meaningfully, is the essence of my participation in the church, in the Body of Christ.

The sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit is love: binding an aggregate of different and unlikely people together, creating a new community on new common ground in the Body of Christ.

Pentecost is the wild goose of

- the whistle blower,
- the foodbank volunteer,
- the hospital visitor,
- the stop Adani protester,
- the young people queering the night,
- the activist who will not let us forget the abandoned ones on Manus Island and Nauru,
- those who dismantle the weapons of war,
- and those seeking welfare and education reform, affordable housing and employment opportunities for all.

Theologian Diarmid O'Murchu has written, "*this Spirit is the living energy, the creative vitality that stirs the waves and whispers in the wind, that warms the sun and eroticises the moon, that vibrates in the sounds of nature, begetting novelty in every realm of the universe.*"ⁱ

Today we celebrate that the spirit of Pentecost is alive and present, in this place, among us!

So, let us then continue to embrace new and different ways of gathering for ritual, different ways of understanding scripture and thinking theologically, so that we might reflect the challenging and unique diversity of sacred energy in our world.

Let us also celebrate the Spirit of play and wonder in this place. As we worship together, care for one another, explore faith together, and go about the life of this congregation.

And finally, let us continue to embrace the inclusive dreams and the prophetic visions of a new heaven and a new earth: challenging the status quo and standing with those beyond the church who work for economic justice and the reduction of inequality; for environmental sustainability and the protection of the planet; and for an end to war and the establishment of justice and peace.

Pentecost is something more than a past event or a collection of old stories. It is the story of continuing Divine presence experienced again and again: "*...the amazing story of people coming to awareness, through reflection on the life of Jesus, that the same Spirit that moved in him has moved in us.*"ⁱⁱ

Not 'incarnate' any longer in just one person, but becoming incarnate in us, in community. As people who dream dreams and see a vision of justice and compassion in the world.

As autumn moves into winter,
may this vision take root in the soil of our lives,
and be nourished by the power of this community
by the faith that we share
and by the Spirit
who is within us and among us.
Always.

Holy breath, catching us like a wind song, sweet communion of a kiss.

Amen

(Followed by the song “*The Kiss*” by Judee Sill, sung by Rachel Collis)

ⁱ O'Murchu, Diarmid. ***Catching up with Jesus. A Gospel Story for our Time.*** New York. Crossroad Publishing, 2005, p. 96.

ⁱⁱ Morwood, Michael. ***Praying a New Story.*** Melbourne. Spectrum, 2003, p. 84.