

SPG#205, Pentecost

May 31, 2009

Acts 2:1-21

Romans 8:22-27

John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

What is the value of Pentecost? Of all feast days in the church year, what makes Pentecost special? Scholars agree that in the early centuries of the Church, it was one of the principal feasts of the Christian year. I have found that scriptural accounts of fantastic occurrences, such as Pentecost, all carry within the account the challenge to the reader of comprehending the uniqueness of any one feast. For example, there is a way to comprehend the Transfiguration. And it is different than our comprehension of the Apostle Paul and his blinding light. There is a certain spirituality of the Crucifixion which is different than the spirituality of the Ascension.

So it is before us on Pentecost to engage our hearts and minds to comprehend the parts of the Pentecost story and an appreciation of the whole. And that has been the task of countless other Christians in countless other liturgies who celebrated Pentecost.

For the most part I think we are aware of the principal parts of the story as depicted in Acts. It says the followers of Jesus, who were from many different areas, speaking different languages, were all together on one place. Suddenly there was the sound of a violent wind. And then tongues of fire appeared over each person. Then they discovered that everyone could comprehend everyone else, even though they were speaking in different languages.

Finally Peter stood up to interpret what had happened. And he in essence said, **God has said that there will be visions: your sons and daughters will prophesy, and your young men will see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.**

For those of us who have inherited Pentecost through the words of the scripture, there probably is the danger of being too overwhelmed by it. Tongues of fire would be enough to overwhelm us a little. The sound of a rushing wind alone would be enough to boggle the mind. That all of them spoke in different languages but understood each other could alone cause one to scratch the head. But in the Pentecost story, all of them occur in the same account. The story of Pentecost is unique in that it includes not one fantastic occurrence, but a collection of fantastic occurrences. And even after the sound of a rushing wind, the tongues of fire, and speaking and understanding in different languages, there is yet more. Because the scripture teaches that in this Pentecost experience these followers of Jesus were empowered to do the unthinkable, to start the church, to spread it over the globe. And what is even more fantastic is that these followers were common people, tax collectors, farmers, fishermen.

There is an important clue in Peter's words that follow the fantastic occurrences. And the clue is not so much in his exact words, but in the implication behind them. For in essence he says "Get used to it. Life in Christ will include fantastic occurrences." And again by implication he is saying, "Life in Christ will include being empowered."

So there is by implication the expectation that the reader will be able to comprehend and appreciate all of these fantastic occurrences. And there is by implication that the reader would be so empowered.

And so began the Church over 2,000 years ago. And what a beginning! And what a history since then! Over time there have been uncountable deeds of love and service from the teaching of students to caring for the sick and dying.

But also, in contrast, for those who thought the Church was an unshakable financially solvent institution, that has proven to not be the case. For those who approach the Church as consumers who expect to be served as customers, that consumer faith has been severely shaken.

For those who thought the Church would always be a safe haven and refuge, that confidence and security has been called into question.

In fact, on this Day of Pentecost in 2009, there are many questions in many minds about the nature and definition of the Church. But if we look in the New Testament, we see in the disciples and followers around Jesus, that with him present, as he loved them, taught them, challenged them astonished them, there was a gathering, a coming together, a community of faith and love. There was a oneness. In today's story of Pentecost in Acts, where all spoke different languages but understood each other, there was a oneness.

In these gatherings in the New Testament, there was never a guarantee of ongoing physical security or predictability. There was never any guarantee of ongoing comfort.

In fact, Jesus, particularly in the gospel of Luke, was always asking his followers to count the cost of following him. He was always asking them to be sure if they really wanted to do this.

As I said before, if we look back in the history of the institutional Church, we see admirable and even astonishing service: the poor and the sick being cared for, the disenfranchised being lifted up, and uncountable good deeds. But we also find the Inquisition, where thousands were tortured and killed in the name of the Church. We find political intrigue, all kinds of deception, and the abuse of the vulnerable.

For my part, I cannot recall a time in my life when I was prouder of my own Church. But I cannot recall a time when I was more critical of her. All in all, in the big picture, in the pushing and in the pulling, I find the Church to be incredibly alive. I find underneath the routine of religion this church to be incredibly alive. And like the first century followers of Jesus, I would gather with you around him, to love and be loved, to serve and to invest. The truth is that gathering around Jesus to be the Church is as much a calculated risk as following him in the first place. And so the question that appears before us as Christians every day is this – Today would you again gather around Jesus Christ in this place, and with these people and be the church?

The rewards of being one in Christ, of working, hoping, and loving together are immense. But there are no guarantees. And we are always asked to count the cost.

The answer to that question is the real birth of the church. For the true church today, regardless of the history of the larger Church, is in our hearts and in our togetherness in Christ. It is in the decisions we make about us together. If there were no walls here, no floor, no ceiling, there would still be a church because we are here. When the church is affirmed, when community in Christ is affirmed, it is cause for celebration, Pentecost celebration.

Because in that celebration is the hope of love that overcomes any barrier, of service that answers any situation. In that celebration we will find the ability to negotiate fantastic occurrences in the scripture and in our own lives.

A couple of years ago, Sarah Smith told me of an experience she had while she was in tremendous pain the hospital. As I recall she was in a prayerful mood, wondering how God could bring her through this. Suddenly she was aware that someone was holding her hand. When she looked up, no one was there. How does her experience stack up to the sound of a rushing wind and tongues of fire? I think that is a hard question. And because it is hard, it means to me that the fantastic of Pentecost can happen in any of our lives.

And so with clear minds, free of illusions, I call upon us to open our hearts and minds to the fantastic in the church, in life, like the sound of a rushing wind and tongues of fire, and to the fantastic that can occur in any one of our lives. And I call upon us to give ourselves to communication that overcomes any barrier. If you do this, if you open yourself to the empowering and fantastic of Pentecost, then in your uniqueness, you will go where no one has gone before. And we in the church, we will go with you. Amen.