

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND JANE BALL



The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday

20 May 2018

Acts 2:1-21
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15
Psalm 104:25-35, 37

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's a great pleasure to be with you this morning and I hope, when I sit down after my sermon, that you think it was a great joy to have me here. I'm on sabbatical from my parishes down in the south of England and Tim has very kindly been hosting me for the last week and with a few more days to go, he asked me if I'd preach today so I'm slightly singing for my supper. I thought I'd got 3 months off preaching, so I've spent the last week – having seen how many of you were here last Sunday – waking up having panic attacks at five in the morning thinking, 'Gosh, I preach to 35 people', so this is a big crowd for me!' So, thank you very much for your very warm welcome.

It's been a very good time for me to come away from my parish because the first months of this year have been incredibly traumatic. They've been some of the most traumatic months of my life so far and I was looking forward to this as an opportunity to come away and reflect and refresh after this horrendous beginning to my year. It really took a down-turn on the 6th of March this year when I turned 50! I suddenly realised (there's something about birthdays with a nought on the end that make you feel like you're doing something significant) from what people were saying to me, that it seems to be down-hill from now on. Unless I manage to make it to my 100th birthday and get my letter from the Queen – or probably the King by then – I've lived over half my life. My optician said to me that I was lucky to get to my age without needing glasses and my vanity made me leave them back there on my seat! My daughter turned 21, my son and his fiancée had a baby so not only did I turn 50, my youngest child is now 21 and I'm a Grandma. I can't believe that I'm old enough to be doing all this!! And the wonderful thing about birthdays is my children delight in reminding me about what things used to be like in the days gone by when I had a memory and I had youth and I didn't have wrinkles. And they say to me, 'Do you remember, mum, when this happened? Do you remember when that happened?' We spend our birthdays reminiscing about years gone by.

It was wonderful to be here yesterday and to go to the British Embassy (I never expected to be doing that on my trip to America!) but it was wonderful to be there as we raised a toast to our newly married couple, Harry and Meghan. It reminded me, watching them, of the times I take wedding services and they always remind me of the time I made my wedding promises. Another landmark to add to my year of depression is that I've now met and known my husband for 30 years (it's been good sometimes – things to celebrate!). But we can't help reminiscing about that day for us 28 years ago when we got married, when we stood at the front of church; not quite with such the level of grandeur but nevertheless it's always special for the couple being married.

It was also wonderful to be part of your celebration last weekend as you celebrated the anniversary of the building of your church 200 years ago. I have to confess to a slightly wry smile inside as I thought about the fact that my church was built around 1130! It's wonderful to be joining you when you have a baptism in the service today, but my font was built about the same time, and so I think to myself every time I baptise somebody, how many people have had their head over that font? But it's wonderful to be part of your 200-year celebration. And it was really wonderful, as part of that, to see the banner outside that spoke of the history of your church and the different buildings and the different rectors that have been here. And to see your past.

We're going to be celebrating another big anniversary this year as we remember the end of the First World War in August and we commemorate that event. Back home in my parish – and in England – we have a process whereby they're trying to recreate and make present again all those soldiers and sailors and airmen who left our country and didn't return through a project called, 'There But Not There'. Every church and community has been asked to purchase some clear, see-through silhouettes that are man-sized. We've purchased 21 of these to represent each person from my village who didn't come back. 21 might not sound very many to you but my village has a total number of 1,200 people so for 21 people to go to serve their country and to die in that service is a big thing. We're going to have these silhouettes placed around the village in the week moving up to Remembrance Sunday. They'll be there in our high street; they'll be there in our pubs, in our shop, in our school because as a small community these are places that they would have known and where they would have been part of. And on Remembrance Sunday they'll be seated in our church. I can't begin to imagine what that day is going to look like when we go in and my church will be full but there'll be spaces where these Perspex people will be sitting; there will be gaps in our community, gaps where we will remember those men who died in service to their country. We will spend time looking back and reflecting and remembering.

But today we celebrate another anniversary, and this is an anniversary like no other: this anniversary is when we celebrate the roots of our Christian heritage, the birth of the Church as we know it today, through the gifting of the Holy Spirit.

I often find myself when I'm preaching, thinking about the readings and trying to wonder what it must have been like for those disciples all those years ago. When they listened to Jesus speak to them, when we listen to our words from the Gospel today, Jesus said, 'I've told you these things, but you can't hear them, and your hearts are sad.' I find myself thinking that the disciples must have been sad because Jesus had told them he was going to leave them. These were his friends; these were closer than friends. They'd spent time with him, they'd lived with him, they'd heard his teaching, they'd seen those miracles and now Jesus was saying to them that he had to go. 'I have to go because if I don't go the Comforter can't come.' And I imagine that if I'd been one of those disciples I would have wanted to say to Jesus, 'But we don't want you to go. We don't want the Comforter, we want you.' When anybody that we know, who we love, who dies – we don't want them to go, we want them to stay with us but for those disciples that wasn't to be any more than it is for us today.

Before I went to my parishes I was a school chaplain. I worked in a girl's school with girls from 4 to 18 years old and I loved the questions they asked but not the ones when they'd say, 'So why do we have Pentecost, Rev'd Jane? We've had the Resurrection, what do we need Pentecost for? Why do we need Ascension? And even more, why do we need Trinity Sunday?' (Everybody in England does their best to be away for Trinity Sunday actually so you get someone else to deal with the tricky issue of the Holy Trinity and I'm so glad it's not next week that Tim asked me to preach!).

I think we needed the gift of the Holy Spirit – apart from the fact that Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to us – because this is a gift that transforms. This gift of the Holy Spirit transforms more than anything else. At Easter when we celebrate the Resurrection we celebrate that gift of love; we celebrate Jesus dying and rising for us and we celebrate the fact that, ‘Nothing,’ Paul says, ‘can separate us from the love of God.’ But in spite of all that, at the beginning of this day all those hundreds of years ago the disciples were still scared and still gathered together in a room. In spite of those 2 disciples on the road to Emmaus, spending time with Jesus and going back from there saying to each other, ‘Didn’t our hearts burn within us?’, they were still scared and still gathered together in one room – until this day; until this day, when the Holy Spirit poured upon them and their lives were transformed from a group of scared individuals to a group of people who went out into the world and began to preach the Good News.

Poor old Luke is struggling: how do we describe what this was like? We talk about tongues of flame and wind, but we can’t really grasp what it’s like. Somebody asked me once, how I would describe the Holy Spirit and I said to them, ‘For me it’s a little bit like the grit in the oyster shell that creates the pearl, that pearl of great price. It’s that irritant that keeps pushing us and prodding us and doesn’t let us get too comfortable and keeps saying to us, ‘You have work to do.’ The power of the Holy Spirit resting on each and every one of us.

This anniversary reminds us that what we need to be doing in our lives is not just reminiscing about the past but looking forward to the future and living in the present. It was very easy for me to feel utterly depressed about turning 50 but lots of my parishioners are a lot older than that and tell me that there are joys to come. I have the joy of looking forward to seeing my grandson growing up and sharing in his life and any future children that might come along. So what if I can’t see everything – there are benefits to that, believe me!

With a wedding, when we listened to those vows yesterday, when those of us that are married remembered the vows and promises that we made, we think of them saying, ‘We will’. These are future promises about a life to come and we look forward and we pray for them that they will have every blessing in their lives together: but it’s not an ending point, a marriage, it’s the beginning of a new journey into the future together.

When we remember all those men from my community, when we remember across the world all those people who died in the war, our remembering in England always ends with an act of commitment to the future. We pray every year that their sacrifice will not be in vain and that we, in our lives, will do all that we can do to work for peace in the world. And we need these reminders every year because we’re not doing it. We’re a very long way from finding peace in our world.

So, we pray today for that renewed gift of the Holy Spirit. We pray that the Holy Spirit will live in our hearts and that we will go out from here with that gift of the Spirit. At baptism services that I conduct in England – and it’s so wonderful to have a baptism here today – when we give to that child or adult the lighted candle, the prayer we say at the end is that we ask for them to be a light to lighten the world, that they will go out and make that light a reality. What we do in here, week by week when we gather together as God’s family, matters because this is where we strengthen each other, this is where we support each other, this is where we are fed by the bread and wine. But this isn’t where it ends, this is just a beginning because we, too, in the light of those baptism promises are sent out into the world.

I wanted to share with you to finish, how my service will be ending back in England – with this sense of looking forward. At the end of today our paschal candle will be blown out and at my church in England the same thing happens but the final things that I say to my congregation fill my heart with joy every year and to me it's one of the most emotional parts of the service. During the last hymn everybody has their own candle as a reminder of that baptism candle, and the candles are lit. We bless the light: the prayer I say is this,

‘Blessed are you, sovereign God, overflowing in love.
With Pentecost dawns the age of the Spirit.
Now the flame of heaven rests on every believer.
Strong and weak, women and men tell out your word;
the young receive visions, the old receive dreams.
With the new wine of the Spirit
they proclaim your reign of love.
Amid the birth pangs of the new creation
the way of light is made known.
Source of freedom, giver of life,
blessed are you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’

And I leave them – and I leave you – with these words of challenge. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, will you dare to walk into God's future, trusting him to be your guide?

Will you dare to embrace each other and grow together in love?

Will you dare to share your riches in common and minister to each other in need?

Will you dare to pray for each other until your hearts beat with the longings of God?

Will you dare to carry the light of Christ into the world's dark places?

We respond to each of these challenges by saying, ‘By the Spirit's power, we will’ and at this point in the service we blow out our Paschal candle. It seems very brutal to see that light disappear, but we carry the light in our hands, we carry the light in our hearts.

So, I pray for all of us, that as we leave church today, we will be renewed by that same transforming gift of the Holy Spirit, that we will leave here in his power, to live and to do his work, that we will shine with God's light in the world, that we will transform the world that we live in to reflect his glory. Amen.



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