

Pentecost
31/5/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 2:1 - 11

Psalm 104

Romans 8:22 - 27

John 15:26 – 27, 16:4b - 15

He will take what is mine and declare it to you

Pentecost is the climax of the Easter season. It is a day rich in symbolism connected with the giving of life at the creation, the renewal of life in the world, and the transformation of life amongst the people of God. At one time Pentecost celebrated the giving of the divine law on Sinai, an occasion when it was said a flame came down from heaven and divided into 70 tongues of fire, one for each nation of the world. All nations could understand, but only Israel promised to keep the law. And Pentecost was a festival to mark the end of the harvest, the commencement of a period of thanksgiving when praise was offered for God's gifts of bounty and grace. At Pentecost the time of gestation was over, it was a time for celebrating birth and the beginning of a new stage of life.

These ideas and many others have helped shape the reading from Acts. The image of a strong, rushing wind that rattled the room where the disciples were gathered reflects the Hebrew word for Spirit: the breath of God that at creation breathed powerfully over the chaos to bring forth life, and the animating breath God breathed into the nostrils of the first humans.

There is another play on imagery. When the Spirit fell and everyone heard of the great deeds of God in their own language, fiery tongues expanded into other tongues and people heard things despite the barrier of language. The scene reverses the events at the Tower of Babel when human striving to reach up to God led to a complete breakdown in communication and community amongst the people of earth. By way of contrast in Acts love divine came down to lift up into the friendship and knowledge of God, diverse people of every race and tongue. No one was excluded from the gift of grace.

Luke loves a good story, as we do ourselves but he uses narrative differently from us. We expect a novel or a narrative to offer us some sense of the inner journey, some sense of the way the characters develop, but Luke doesn't give us any of that. Nor does he make any allowance for those who want to know more about the inner workings of this event. His story is unequivocally centred on a community that had no private resources of its own and was brought to life by a power beyond its grasp. God is the main actor in this drama, and the effects of what happened brought hope and life to the disciples. But the result was not unambiguous: these strange, inscrutable happenings pushed the boundaries of imagination. What Luke makes clear is that the 120 disciples, and the crowd who gathered were party to an occasion when the Apostles found their tongues and began to preach. It was deeply unsettling. The uncontainable unconstrainable Spirit of God was setting things in motion and it affected people from the whole world. Bystanders were moved, bemused and some scoffed at these events.

Rather than being an account of an exotic inner personal journey this account of the outpouring of God's Spirit refers to noisy wind, fire, loud talk, buzzing confusion and public debate. Not all eyes and ears recognised the presence of divine life here. As on the day in the Synagogue, years before, when Jesus read from Isaiah and declared the prophet's words had come true, questions were posed, puzzlement, anger and scorn were rife. Peter who once denied his faith and, weeping, deserted the one who called him, stood up to speak, filled with the Spirit. A cowardly blusterer was transformed into a forthright proclaimer of Christ. Spirit empowered people were able to hear intelligible proclamation. Something new was let loose on the earth. This is a story of the shaking of the foundations. Surrounded by controversy and unexplainable events, the work of God was revealed, and the church's witness began to spread into the whole wide world, but not by virtue of any superior marketing strategy, or new technological tricks. God's love touched and apprehended those who gave witness in such a way that their whole being was engaged.

Although Luke and John treat the coming of the Spirit in a different time frame, there is no difference in the meaning of this gift. We hear it in Peter's preaching, and the Gospel of John makes very plain: the work of the Spirit is profoundly connected with the story of Jesus, and his gift of the Spirit at Resurrection. At the end of the Gospel reading Jesus says: [the Spirit] "*will take what is mine and declare it to you.*" The action of the Spirit does not promise to make all people more aware of their spirituality in a general sense. Rather, in Peter's sermon that follows our reading, and especially in John, the Spirit works like an advocate in a court, a defence counsel who makes a case for Jesus. And the Advocate does this in spite of and over against the judgements of the world. Furthermore, when the disciples find they have the energy and insight to make this case before others and teach others what Jesus taught, it is the power of the Spirit at work in them. This is about people being helped to grasp who Jesus is for us: seeing his life as relevant for all time and all people.

This is what we celebrate today: that the Spirit that gave life to the world and sustains it is made known through one of us. At a time when belief in Jesus is under assault from all directions, even within the church, Pentecost stands as a witness, that the God of life has turned towards us in love and chosen to deal with us, through him. Some people take this idea to be an example of anebriated stupidity. Others are confused by it, and others find in this news a vital clue that opens a way to life.

When you hear the story from Acts, and then look at the state of the church in the world today it is easy to feel anxious about the future and to long for the Holy Spirit to do something soon! It may be that the Holy Spirit already is, and we are unable to notice its enlivening presence. Or perhaps we are already in dispute with what it is doing. However, our texts leave us in no doubt: when the Spirit works it makes a case for Jesus. He is not just an inspiring memory: he is a promised presence that advocates for renewal and life. Being touched by the Spirit will inevitably mean coming to a renewed appreciation of who he is. And it will mean being drawn more deeply into his pattern of love for God, and his offer of reconciling love for others in the world. The gift of the Spirit is not intended to strengthen our self-indulgence, or deepen our obsessions. It breaks all barriers, so that we might be drawn more deeply into the community of God's love, and find the way to self-transcendence: the way to life.
