

Pentecost
12/06/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Numbers 11:24 - 30

Psalm 65

Acts 2:1 - 21

John 20:19 - 23

Sermon preached by Rev. Morag Logan

Pentecost would have to be the most unsettling festival in the church year. It is certainly not a good festival for those of us who are more comfortable when events, celebrations, festivals, decision making, discernment – in fact life in general – seems to be under control. The presence of the spirit of God in the midst of God's people in our texts today appears in events with a distinctly wild character. The presentation in Acts speaks of the rush of a violent wind, tongues as of fire, people suddenly speaking in other languages; in the Numbers text we read one part of a larger story, but it is strange, unsettling too as the remarkable numinous spirit which seemed so closely linked to the person of Moses was sent out, spread out into seventy elders, and they prophesied. In the Old Testament texts, particularly when there are groups of people involved, this is often associated with ecstatic and wild behaviour, trances, strange or elevated frames of mind. So is the celebration of Pentecost a call to similar behaviour? A celebration of extreme forms of behaviour? Well, no I don't think so.

There are elements of this, yes, but only elements, and this is not the whole story. In the Luke passage some critical symbols of the spirit are used – wind, or breath, tongues of fire, of flame. These are associated in Jewish traditional teaching with the epiphany of God on Mt Sinai, which in traditional teaching (not biblical text) God's spirit divided into 70 tongues of flame and gave the law to each of the nations of the world; this understanding is probably the background to the Luke passage. These are symbols of life, of energy, of boundless power, power from the spirit of God. They are also things that are beyond human control. Australians, more than many in the last few years, can witness to the power of wind, flame, and water, which through baptism, and John's imagery of a spring of living water is also an image of the spirit. This sort of imagery is an important part of Pentecost – a celebration of the inexplicable but energising power of the spirit of God.

In the midst of all of this unsettling, wild imagery, however the passages each convey their own clear sense of purpose, and the pyrotechnics, as it were, are not, finally, the point of the passages, of our celebration. The unsettling events relayed to us in the text are not there simply to be unsettling, or as a display or a celebration of unsettling power, or to try to describe to us an unusual historical event, or to call us to behave in a similar manner. These are deeply symbolic stories – the symbol of the tongues of fire already calling to mind the epiphany of God, the giving of the law.

In the Acts narrative of the day of Pentecost, the main emphasis is on communication. The disciples, silenced by the events in Jerusalem, find themselves speaking in other languages, proclaiming the great deeds of God so that all present, from all parts of the Mediterranean world could understand, and could feel themselves addressed in their own native tongue, could hear the disciples proclaiming the great acts of God. Some of those hearing the disciples speak suspect influence of other types of spirits, they suspect that there has been a bit of over-indulgence in festival wine, but what others hear is a miracle of language. This is an event which reverses the ending of the story of the tower of Babel. For this one morning, early in the life of the early church, the diverse community of Jews in Jerusalem could reach back to the beginning times, reach back into the mythical world outside of history, before the confusion of the languages and could communicate. What they communicate is itself also a reversal of the story of the tower. The mythical Babel tower was build to proclaim human prowess, the greatness of human endeavour – the Pentecost story is of people set free to proclaim the mighty acts of God.

The Numbers passage is less familiar to us, and what we read was only a part of what is quite a complex story. Here again, the point is not the unsettling events themselves, but a wider purpose. Luke presents a story about communication, the miracle of the spirit bringing understanding, inspiration and proclamation. The Numbers passage is a story about leadership, and the sharing of leadership. Moses is, not for the first or the last time, finding his task overwhelming. The people are complaining, the conditions are too harsh, the resources too few, the manna was too boring, Egypt, the world of the past, was too attractive. Moses has complained to God, and this story is addressing this problem. Some of the spirit that rests on Moses is shared among 70 men known to be elders and leaders – and we are told that they “prophesied.” Although it often is the cast in the stories of prophesying from the OT some sort of ecstatic experience or a frenzied state seems to be envisaged and it has been assumed here. Here, however, the point is not strange behaviour, but the equipping of the community for a broader based leadership. Here “prophecy” would perhaps better be understood as a visionary experience, something more like the giving of the law on Sinai, inspiring and enabling the seventy leaders to assist Moses in encouraging and struggling with the recalcitrant people.

There is, however, on twist to this story. The commissioning of the seventy elders seems to have been a structured event. The elders, recognized by the community are called out to the tent of meeting to participate in receiving some of the spirit that rests on Moses. This spirit, however, breaks the boundaries of the structures that Moses, God and the community have established. Eldad and Medad are named elders, recognized within the community, but for whatever reason, they do not go to the tent of meeting. Nonetheless, the spirit of God descended on them, and they prophesied where they were, in the midst of the camp. And this seems to have been viewed as a threat. Joshua, at least wants it to be stopped. As this is a story about the leadership of the community, it is perhaps not surprising that this is perceived as something of a threat – Eldad and Medad are standing outside the established structures, a risk. Moses takes a different line, and is open to Eldad and Medad’s ministry – within the structure or outside it.

The figures of Moses and Joshua are not straightforward figures to understand. Their behaviour certainly does not always appear comprehensible or admirable. Certainly in the chapter which follows this immediately, Miriam and Aaron's exercise of leadership of the community outside Moses' authority is not accepted. Here, however, despite Joshua's anxiety, Moses is open here to the divinely inspired leadership within the community, whether those leaders are within the established structure – at the right place and at the right time - or not.

In this story of the giving of the spirit in the book of Numbers, we are given a picture of the struggling exodus community. Looking back to a past now remembered as relatively comfortable, they are caught up in complaint, cannot see their way forward into a new future. Moses, on his own, is not enough – the community needs visionary leadership, a more broadly based leadership, and one that is given both within and outside established structures.

As we celebrate Pentecost, we need to hold to both of these pictures, from Numbers and Luke. The celebration of Pentecost is not confined to seeking personal ecstatic experiences for ourselves, but seeking, praying for the gift of the Spirit among us, inspiring the church in our own day. With the Numbers text, we need to be open to a broadly based, leadership calling us into an unexpected future when we might want to cling to the past. We need to be inspired also to accept, as did Moses, those times when the spirits equipping of individuals for leadership and ministry occurs outside of our structures, our “tents of meeting”; from places we do not expect, contexts we may find difficult.

In his Pentecost story Luke inspires us with a vision of what it means to be the Church, if we are open to the breath of the Spirit. Cultivating that openness again is not searching for experiences: It is openness to the many different languages and expressions of the great acts of God. It is the possibility of hearing different, possibly alien voices – and not hearing drunkenness, but being open to hearing other voices praising God. It is a surrendering of control and power to allow for openness to the spirit of love. Ultimately it is to face the Spirit and pray: your kingdom come.
