**Sunday 28th May 2023 – Pentecost Sermon by Peter**

*Acknowledging my reading from Bill Loader – Theology at Uni SA*

One of the three pilgrimage festivals, Pentecost falls 50 days (seven weeks) after Passover (or our celebration of Good Friday), as its Greek name, Pentecoste (50th), preserves. It is also called the Feast of Weeks, an occasion to celebrate the gathering in of the harvest (Exod 3:14-17; Lev 23:15-22). The coming of the Spirit is about harvest! It also became a time to celebrate the coming of the divine Law on Sinai. Legend has it that on that occasion a flame came down from heaven and divided into 70 tongues of fire, one for each nation of the world. All could understand, but only one nation promised to keep the Law, Israel.

Such symbolism has shaped our story. Perhaps it also lies under the influence of the Tower of Babel story in which human ambition resulted in the collapse of the tower and the breakdown of communication: the explanation as to why people speak different languages and cannot understand one another (Gen 11:1-9). Certainly the imagery of wind reflects the word for Spirit, which in both Hebrew and Greek, means wind, breath and Spirit.

These rich embellishments may hide a historical event. It is entirely credible that the first great pilgrim festival after Jesus' execution at Passover and his disciples' acclamation of his resurrection would have been a special occasion for the fledgling Christian community. Perhaps there was some event amid the crowd. Perhaps there was some experience which those who believed saw as an outpouring of the Spirit. Luke is hardly likely to have dreamt up the occasion from probabilities.

Yet we can see that Luke has been painting panels of faith richly coloured with symbolism. He has Jesus appear after his resurrection for forty days before ascending. His hearers would have made the connections to the forty years in the wilderness. He has 120 believers assembled in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost. His hearers would have recognised the numerical symbolism. Here was true Israel. Then comes the Spirit and the harvest! The Spirit comes as wind. The Spirit comes also in tongues of fire. None of this would be lost on those familiar with the word used for Spirit and stories told about Sinai. And some would hear the echoes of Babel.

Not only is the symbolism striking. The scheme of events also clearly reflects symbolic interests. We celebrate the Day of Pentecost as the day of the coming of the Spirit because of Luke's symbolic history. In John's gospel the Spirit is a gift of the risen Jesus on the day of resurrection when he appears after having risen and ascended to the Father - all back to front, when compared with Luke's scheme. No other New Testament writer reflects Luke's timetable of events. Even Luke, himself, in his gospel, has the ascension much earlier according to some early manuscripts (24:51). Paul and most others assume that resurrection means exaltation to God's right hand. From God's presence Jesus then appears as the risen one to his disciples - and not just limited to forty days. Paul hails his own encounter - long after forty days after Easter - as an appearance of the risen Lord.

So, whatever historical event lies beneath Luke's story in Acts 2:1-21 - and there probably is one - we have to recognise that Luke is writing a symbolic narrative which wants to tell us something much more than a once-off historical event. He is celebrating the presence of the Spirit in the early Christian movement. He does so with a slight sense of humour. He alludes to the phenomenon of speaking in tongues, which Paul also mentions, and gives it also a symbolic twist. It makes people sound like drunks to those who do not know what is going on. But to those who do know, here is a language miracle, which reverses the curse of Babel. Communication is restored!

Wouldn’t it be lovely not to have to learn languages.

Luke nowhere follows his creative innovation through to its logical conclusion at a literal level, namely, that Christians filled with the Spirit don't have to learn languages! How often people have wished that they could! So, here, too we have symbolism.

Like a movie director, Luke creates a scene with wind and fire. The scene is a commentary on the whole movie to follow. The God of Sinai and the Law is acting again. The promise of an abundant flow of God's Spirit is being fulfilled. God's Word, God's Law, is being declared. These people with flames shooting from their heads are again the true Israel, committed to obey God's Word. History is repeating itself, but in a new way. The focus on Israel is reinforced when we realise that Luke is talking here about people from all parts of the empire: all Jews! This is a celebration of God and God's people. In Acts 10 the same blessing becomes available to people of other nations.

Luke's symbolic scene expresses hope and confidence. John's gospel has Jesus say to his disciples as they face the prospect of his death: ''Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God and believe in me!" He then goes on to speak of the coming of the Spirit (14:16-17), which is then expanded in our Gospel Reading for today. If we celebrate the presence of God in the person of Jesus who lived compassion in flesh and blood, does his death leave us without hope and only with memory? Is such life still possible? Luke's picture in words answers in unmistakable terms: yes. God, God's Spirit, the Spirit which drove Jesus, is accessible to all! Believe it! Believe that God said yes to Jesus by raising him from the dead. God said: this is who I am and how I am! We are not left with a good and inspiring memory, but a promised presence. That presence promises we stay in touch with the divine word, we learn to communicate in love, and we can celebrate being a community in true continuity with God's people of all ages.

Peter's speech is equally flamboyant as it uses Joel. This enhances the moment of great drama: moon turning to blood, a darkened sun, blood, fire, smoke - it just needs dramatic musical accompaniment, drums, trumpets, clashing cymbals. We're off again into a block buster portrayal of Pentecost! Both the story and the speech are doing things, painting word pictures, inviting us to fantasy - all because Luke really wants us to sense a momentous truth. The Spirit, Breath, Wind, the Presence of God, which we celebrate in Jesus, can be present in human community. When this happens and we let it happen, the ancient curses which divide us are undone and we connect with God in a new way and we gain a new sense of identity.

The simple joy (and relief!) of the apostles hides something much deeper: the cross wasn’t a disaster, a symbol of hopelessness. At our deepest levels we make decisions about hopefulness and hopelessness. The killing of compassion, violence against the good, unrelenting suffering and oppression is devastating. Much of the time we pretend it is non-existent or busy ourselves so as not to face its reality. If we allow ourselves to be confronted by the disaster of the cross and many cross-like experiences facing us in the world, we are thrown into the dilemma about hope: is there any? This story’s simple narrative of joy is an assertion of hope. That hope believes defiantly in the possibility of peace. Remember that Jesus often met the disciples with a simple ‘Shalom’. This is not just ‘Hello’ but ‘Peace be with you’.

We were discussing our mission statement in the Faith Conversations this week**. ‘Just like Jesus’** -unless you want to work on a better one. The passion that we see in the disciples during and after Pentecost must not be reduced to just a mission statement to be obeyed, a strategy to be worked at, as if the focus now is task-oriented activity alone. On our own we will fail by burning out or failing to be led. Or, all too easily, we will become frustrated or legalistic, with ourselves and with others. Instead, the Spirit invites our engagement in life acts creatively, recalling the wonderful account in Genesis of God breathing on shapes of clay to bring them to human life- the first movement of the spirit in the Bible story. (Gen 2:7). The word for Spirit also means ‘breath’, so the symbolism is rich and evocative.

We heard a passage in Corinthians – that is from a letter written to the fledgling church in Corinth, a Greek city on mainland Greece. Here is a message that the community of God cannot exist without the Spirit of God and that that Spirit gives utterance to a variety of gifts. A reminder that we rely on each other to make a whole community, or the Body of Christ.

Following on from chapter 12 in Corinthians is chapter 13. What a coincidence! It is the chapter on love and reminds us that the gifts are to be shared in love for without it we are just clanging cymbals.

Gifts are there for a purpose - to enable ministry and caring to operate more effectively. They are not awards or possessions, although - and this is important - Paul has seen that they can be treated as such and so alienated from both their purpose and even the Spirit. It may sound strange, but Paul assumes people can sin by using gifts of the Spirit. 12:7 recognises that people have different gifts, but all are for what is fitting and appropriate, especially for the whole.

The list in 12:8-11 assumes that these are not one's natural talents, but abilities one acquires as a result of the Spirit's activity. We might say they are generated or arise as a result of the impact of the Spirit. When people open themselves to God's transforming and energising love, new things happen.

New things that Peter quotes from the Old Testament book of Joel.

“In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,

**Just to emphasise this,**   and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

**What! Even daughters. Weren’t they meant to be subservient and quiet**and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.   
Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

**Including slaves now as well as women!**And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

**No one will be able to miss this – Isn’t this like during the Exodus**Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Everyone who calls on the Lord! It’s not setting up some new hierarchy of **inheritance, wealth, physical strength, more important gifts of the spirit,**

**The Spirit comes with power and humility, just like Jesus!**