

Today, according to our Christian calendar, we celebrate the high feast of Pentecost. The images that arise in our minds on this occasion are of people gathering together – a far cry from the situation we find ourselves in this year. In my memory of celebrating Pentecost in India, it was a colourful occasion accompanied by much commotion as large numbers of people came together for a wonderful communal celebration. This we can mentally translate into the many national and cultural contexts around the world from which we all hail. In all these places worldwide it will be a very different occasion this year. But let us bear in mind, nothing is static in God's way with the world.

On the particular Pentecost we read about in Acts chapter 2, large crowds from around the known world had gathered in Jerusalem as was the annual custom - if at all possible - to make the journey to Jerusalem. Originally it was an agricultural festival on the 50th day after the Passover to give thanks at the bringing in of the first sheaf from the wheat harvest. Later it became the occasion for both Jews and non-Jews who followed the Law of Moses to gather in order to celebrate God's promise to Noah after the flood, never again to destroy all flesh upon the earth, and to remember the Law which God gave to Moses in the Sinai desert. It was a call to affirm life and community under God's promise, expressed **visibly and actively** by making a pilgrimage to their holy city and particularly to the Temple, their focus of unity.

On this occasion reported in Acts, there was, however, another group that had gathered. A small number had come together behind closed doors – one could say in corona parlance: a self-isolating group. They had separated themselves from the milling crowds outside, on the one hand fearful of what might happen to them if they mixed in with all the rest. But it was not only timidity that had brought them together, but anticipation. They had been told to wait for God’s Spirit to come among them, inspire and lead them forward. And indeed their hopes and anticipation were fulfilled beyond anything they could imagine. It began with a noise as though wind was rushing through the house. Then they saw tongues of fire as it were on each of them. Next they find themselves bursting out of the house, drawing attention to themselves by preaching to the crowds and finding that they were being understood by those of different language backgrounds! Suddenly after Jesus’ ascension, the Apostles are filled with the Spirit, and the first response is to boldly proclaim the Good News of Christ’s resurrection. The crowds in turn express amazement and wonder, but there was also a sense of confusion and uncertainty. Some even sneered, making fun of what had occurred.

Dear friends, what **are** we to make of this extraordinary account, especially under our present Covid-19-dictated circumstances, when we are expected to continue with making enormous adjustments to our familiar ways of engaging our lives and the practice of our faith?

These days, as we find a way to live and cope with the Covid19 virus, many of us sorely miss the gatherings for worship and joint celebration; we miss our meeting in a beloved and sacred space in which the people of God have been coming together and praying over the years and in some cases centuries. As one colleague said, *'some of our church buildings are not architecturally significant and some are not beautiful, but all of them have inspired affection and people have discerned in them a beauty which reflects the beauty of God'*. This Pentecost we will miss being together and touching each other as we share the peace. We will not be breaking the same bread and drinking from the same cup. To quote Pope Francis: *'Priests should be able to smell the sheep'*. Not many of us will be able to smell each other, sitting at our computers in our own private spaces. Instead, as the same colleague pointed out, we can switch each other off as we please. All told many of us will feel bereft of the physicality and immediacy that are so essential to our gatherings and our interchange. More than that, we ask about the implications for some of the most fundamental expressions of our faith.

Pentecost, celebrated as the birthday of the Church, breaks down, firstly into compelling each Christian to work for greater unity and closer fellowship. That in itself becomes challenged these days. But have we not discovered how individuals and congregations have discovered ingenious ways to be together and to take care of one another? Surely all this is a sign of God's Spirit at work among us in these times. Secondly, the Spirit will inspire each of us wherever we are in our enclosed private space if we open

ourselves to her presence among us, by making us into bold witnesses to our resurrection faith. Recently a friend who identified herself as someone who does not have much in common with the church volunteered the opinion that she was impressed by the way in which churches had responded to the corona crisis in terms not only of the stance the official leadership took, but also in what actions individual pastors, congregations and members engaged in. This is definitely not to claim that Christians are the better people. It does, however, remind us that we have a claim to live up to – the claim, or rather the assurance that the Holy Spirit gives us many gifts by which to communicate to those around us God's affirmation of life and God's unheard of possibilities to bring people together.

Friends, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus has resulted in the gift of the Spirit not just once and for all, but in each time and each season anew. The early Apostles were the first to experience this energy. In my Indian context there is a particular occasion remembered for the Spirit's action when the Church of South India was founded. Parallel to the struggle for national independence the churches in South India which had grown out of Western missionary endeavours, decided to leave behind them the matters which separated them and to unite organically as one church. For the first time in church history both episcopal and non-episcopal churches had dared to find common ground in doctrine and faith practice. Presbyterians, Congregationalists, the Basel Mission churches, the Anglican Church in India, Burma and Ceylon with its 4 Southern Dioceses and the South India Province of the Methodist

Church (Wesleyan) embarked on a journey of unity together. This unity was to be a concrete step towards overcoming the brokenness in the life of the Indian church, a commitment to being one family within a diversity of traditions. The day when this became a reality was the 27th September 1947. It was indeed experienced as a Pentecostal moment.

In our day, within this Covid19 pandemic and all the hardships, sorrow and uncertainty it is causing, we can be confident that God no less longs to gift the Holy Spirit to people. All we need to do is to allow the Spirit to work, to open the confines surrounding our timid faith. It is this Spirit that sets the Church in motion. She is our source of comfort and confidence in good times but also in times of struggle. Let us therefore embrace this precious gift. This, friends, is therefore our message for our Pentecost 2020. Amen.