

Pentecost 2020

Acts 2.1-21

Ps 104.26-36

1 Cor 12.1-13

John 20.19-23

A few weeks ago I made the rather bold prediction that we'd be back in our churches by Pentecost. That prediction wasn't made on the basis of any inside knowledge or any prophetic gift. I did think it might actually be possible given the flattening of the infection curve, but really my prediction was more about a desire, a wish, a longing for us to be able to gather again to worship together on such an important Sunday as Pentecost. We missed celebrating Easter day together, surely we could celebrate Pentecost together.

I could take some comfort in that theoretically my prediction has turned out to be correct. Today we can gather in groups of no more than 10, and in the Diocese of Adelaide today, there are some parish churches where people are celebrating Pentecost together, in groups of 10 or less. But, it's not the same. We still cannot really gather as we would have done in earlier years.

But in an odd kind of way maybe there is an importance in that. The whole point of gathering together on any Sunday is certainly to praise God together, and pray together, to hear the scriptures read and explained, and receive the sacrament together, but the final words of the Eucharist sum up the ultimate purpose - 'go in peace to love and serve the Lord', or 'go in the peace of Christ'. We gather together so we can be strengthened to go out. The ultimate point is not the gathering together, the point is being sent out. And this being sent out is really highlighted in the feast of Pentecost.

There are a number of options for the Bible readings at Pentecost. This year I am focussing on one of the Gospel options - John chapter 20 verses 19 to 23.

Here it is:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

There are a number of important facets to this passage that are worth considering.

First, unlike the other gospels including Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, the giving of the Holy Spirit and the commissioning of the disciples is set in the evening of the day of resurrection, Easter Day.

Second, when Jesus comes to the disciples on that evening, the first thing he does is to say, 'peace be with you'. That would have been significant for at least two reasons. In John's gospel this is the first time Jesus had appeared to his disciples after his resurrection. Prior to this in John's gospel only Mary Magdalene had seen Jesus after his resurrection. So, the disciples would have been very startled when Jesus appeared among them. For him to say, 'peace be with you', would have been like saying 'I mean you no harm'.

And, this is also the first time the disciples have seen Jesus since they all abandoned him when he was arrested; since Peter denied he even knew Jesus, and since the disciples were nowhere to be seen at his crucifixion.

The disciples were probably very conscious of their failures, and so when Jesus said 'peace be with you', he was forgiving them not just for any kind of moral failure which is not really the idea of sin in John's gospel, but rather for their lack of faith, for their lack of seeing who Jesus is and what God was doing in all the events leading up the crucifixion. Blindness in terms of seeing who Jesus is, and the inability and unpreparedness to see what God is doing in Jesus is the real problem in John's gospel, and Jesus was forgiving the disciples for that when he came to them and said 'peace'.

Then Jesus said, 'as the father has sent me so I send you', and so Jesus commissioned the disciples to go out and continue his mission. As Jesus had been sent, so the disciples were being sent.

Lots of Christians miss this part of Christianity. Many Christians think that being a Christian is believing in God, trusting Jesus for forgiveness and salvation and doing ones best to obey the commandments, which is all fine and good, but being a Christian is being a disciple of Jesus, and that means in part at least continuing Jesus' ministry. Taking it out beyond Jerusalem. The church is to be like a centrifuge flinging the ministry of Jesus out from Jerusalem right around the world.

The disciples were not to be repeating what Jesus had done, they were implementing its effect. They were implementing Jesus' achievement - not duplicating it. In the same way a composer composes the music and the orchestra implements it.

Jesus' death and resurrection is enough. Jesus' death and resurrection has achieved what is necessary for the new creation. We don't have to do that again, but we take that achievement and make it known - make it real as best we can.

All people who are baptised are sent. We all share in this vocation for our life.

Next, Jesus breathed on the disciples. That image might remind us of another breathing in the Bible. In the Genesis chapter 2, the second account of the creation, God made the first humans and breathed into them the breath of life, and the text says, 'the man became a

living being' (2.7). Here is Jesus beginning the new creation, the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, breathing new life into the disciples, the life of the Spirit of God. Just as the intention in the first creation was that the humans would serve the mission of God, so in the new creation the disciples were to serve the mission of God seen in Jesus.

As Jesus breathed on them he said 'receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'.

The message of Jesus is very much about forgiveness, not so much forgiveness of the moral mistakes of individual humans, or the individual moral mistakes of humans, but reconciliation between God and humanity. In John's gospel forgiveness is for the blindness, the rejection of God's plan in Jesus, the failure to see what God is on about in Jesus. This may result in moral mistakes, but it's the cause that is central. In a real way for a Church that is focussed on mission and evangelism, helping people to see the truth about Jesus and accept that truth is the reconciliation that really counts.

Pentecost is so important because it reminds us of a critical character of the church. We are not to be a holy club whose existence is about our existence. We are to be a community of people who know we are sent by God; who are conscious that we have a mission. We have a task. We have a vocation, we have a purpose, and that purpose is to continue making the achievement of Jesus known.

I wish we could all be together to celebrate Pentecost, but the fact we can't might actually be a gift because this reminds us that the point of being together is not to be together. The point of gathering together is so we can be strengthened to be sent out. This year we are already out. So, in a funny kind of way we have a head start.

As we take our vocation seriously we do need to depend on the Holy Spirit. We can't do this work, we can't implement Jesus' achievement without the strength of Jesus, and so we really must pray not just today but every day - 'fill me Lord with your Holy Spirit for the work you call me to do today', and in that strength we go.

Our calling as disciples of Jesus is to take the news of Jesus in the best way we can to those who haven't heard it yet, depending on the power of the Holy Spirit to actually 'make it work'.

Today and everyday, the Lord bless, keep and empower you for God's mission wherever you are. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. In the name of Christ. Amen.