

Rector's Sermon: Pentecost (31 May)

So, we have finally reached Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to Jesus' first followers, empowering the frightened pack of disciples to become a brazen bunch of evangelists. We see the curse of the Tower of Babel reversed in one amazing outburst. Former fishermen and other followers of Jesus became interpreters par excellence. We see the Babel scene played backward, with the devout Jews from Elam, Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Pontus, Pamphylia and the like now hearing the Good News of what God has done through Jesus each in their own native language.

The gospel is spoken not in confusing babble but with a crystal clarity that leaves the hearers cut to the quick and before this amazing day is done, 3,000 devout Jews will be baptised as followers of Jesus, the Christ. The result of Pentecost was to take a diverse group of people and to bring them together into a common understanding of what God's deeds of power meant to their lives.

And yet not everyone understood what was happening in their midst. The account of that day in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells us that some onlookers took the excitement for a drunken mob. Certainly, it feels easy to reduce the disciples' behaviour as coming from heavy drinking. It might also be simpler if we relegated Pentecost to an outbreak of religious hysteria. But the Pentecost experience was not due to alcohol and is not so easily reduced to nothing more than hysteria.

The physicist and Anglican priest, John Polkinghorne, in his book "Quarks, Chaos and Christianity," shines a light on people he describes as "nothing butters" when it comes to the world we live in - reductionists who see a thing as "nothing but" its physical explanation. This is an ongoing tendency about lots of phenomenon for which we have no ready understanding. We leave our imagination at the door and only look at the most elemental form of a thing to explain everything.

For someone with a "nothing but" way of making sense of the world, the compositions of Bach and Beethoven, Bach's Passions and Beethoven's Symphonies become nothing but vibrations that interact with our eardrums to create the effect we call music. The Mona Lisa becomes nothing but flecks of paint that we experience as differing colours. Baptism becomes nothing but water poured over someone's head as a part of a ritual observance, and the Pentecost experience becomes nothing but religious hysteria.

And on a very superficial level that is right, Bach and Beethoven's greatest works do reach our ears as nothing but vibrations against our eardrums, for that is how the beauty of the composers' work is transmitted. But we can't reduce their music to mere vibrations hitting our eardrum.

And of course, the Mona Lisa is just flecks of matter we call "paint" put on matter we call "canvas" in ways that we experience as an interplay of colours. But her enigmatic smile cannot be reduced to the physical matter that forms the art. In all these works of art, the notes of music and the paint on

the canvas, convey so much more, that reducing them to the essential physical phenomena totally misses the point.

So also, the Pentecost experience of the Holy Spirit coming to Jesus' disciples on that fiftieth day after the Passover, would have created some emotionalism akin to religious hysteria. Yet whatever caused some in the crowd that day to wonder whether the disciples had been drinking, was not all there was to the event.

We know that there was something more because of the immediate and the lasting impact of that day. The immediate effect was to begin with sharing the Good News of Jesus with those who were far off as well as with those who were near to the Jewish faith. The centuries-long change is that the way of Jesus became a light to the gentiles. It is in this change, which began in these earliest days of Christianity, and which expanded through the ministry of both Peter and Paul to invite everyone into the Reign of God, that we see something more than an emotional event is taking place.

The Pentecost event defied any "it was nothing but" explanation. We can't reduce Pentecost to "It was nothing but emotionalism," or "It was nothing but mass hysteria," or even "It was nothing but a long-ago event we can no longer explain." The closest we can get is "Pentecost was nothing less than the presence of God."

That day, the Jesus Movement was transformed not by human will, but by an act of the Holy Spirit. The main aspect of Christianity that was transformed in that first Pentecost was that the gospel moved beyond Israel and Judaism and became a unifying event. Pentecost showed that what unites us is God's spirit and that is far, far, more important than what ever divides us.

Pentecost is a time to remember that God's spirit is still present in a mighty way. That's why our worship can't be reduced to "nothing but" music, readings and a sermon. The Eucharist can never be described as "nothing but" bread and wine, any more than baptism is "nothing but" water and words. That is far too limiting.

Beyond this, we know that today we cannot limit who is in and who is out of the reach of the Reign of God any more than it could be limited to Israel.

For when we encounter nothing less than the presence of God, we come to know that we cannot limit who God is and how God acts, no matter how we might try. We who follow Jesus now are called to act on our love of God as much as those first disciples were called to share God's love. We are to share the love of God freely, without ever putting limits on who God might love.

We are to take the Good News that God loves us and every one of us, and share that gospel, in our deeds as well as our words, with everyone we meet, as we leave worship, going in peace to love and serve the Lord. We are empowered to do this by nothing less than the power and presence of the God we experience this very day in our worship, in and through the gift of the power of the Holy Spirit. So, let us make a promise to not become a 'nothing butter' and rather enter into God's imagination and embrace God's vision of a sacramental world, full of graceful opportunities and flowing with generosity, hospitality and love. Amen.