

Sermon Feast of Pentecost Year C 2019

People go on trips and holidays for all sorts of reason: to rest, to escape the rat race, for a pleasant time, for rare, exotic experiences, for a change of scene, to see something new. But sometimes there is *as much* joy in planning a trip as in the trip itself. Now, some people are just happy to go with the flow, to jump on a plane and to make up each stage as they go along. But that can waste a lot of time and effort (and money) while on the road. And it can expose you to a lot of frustration and disappointment. For the of the Book of Acts there is also a very *definite plan* of how the message of Jesus is to spread outwards - how it will *travel* - to every nation. The writer Luke thinks of the world as populated by nations: related groups of people and not just individuals. And so, the carrying of the Good News - the preaching of the gospel - will take place in three concentric circles. First in Jerusalem; then in Judea and Samaria; and then to the ends of the earth. And so, as we read through the Gospel, and then through Acts, we see the carrying the Gospel, the movement of the Good News, move out through these circles.

The Spirit of Pentecost initiates this process, as we hear in the first reading today. But this first movement, the first activity of the group of disciples is restricted to Jerusalem. But then, later in Acts, the Spirit intervenes to enable the carriers of the Gospel to move from the home nation in Judea and Samaria. And then ultimately out to other nations, to the gentiles as well. But as we trace the wonderful story of those first Christian missionaries throughout the Book of Acts, and we hear how in each new region the Good News is carried, we also hear how the Spirit has *already* been at work preparing the ground for the messengers of the Gospel. Those who receive the Gospel are receptive. The Spirit of God has been preparing the way.

Earlier Christian generations were terribly interested in when exactly in this great historical process the gospel first came to *their* own nation and how the Spirit had prepared *their* nation for its reception. We see this in the writing of Augustine for the Romans, of Gregory of Tours for the French and of Bede for the English.

Even in our own corner of the world, the inhabitants of the Torres Straights still celebrate annually, the Coming of the Light. But whether the Torres Straight Islanders or the English or the French, each wanted to know when the Gospel reached them, where they stood in the journey of the gospel – that ripple - from Jerusalem to their own shores.

But even as our ancestors in faith noted the fruitful reception of the gospel among various peoples, they also so often recognised how the Spirit was silently at work long before the people had heard the name of Christ. And so, to recognise how each generation was passing the light of faith. It oughtn't to surprise us that this is how it has worked in so many places and in so many different language groups and cultures: the Holy Spirit preparing the ground work; using what was accessible and understood so people could be brought from ignorance to truth.

But this looking back, this trying to see how the Spirit might have been at work in the distant ages preparing the way is a kind of thinking that is quite foreign to most of us. We kind of take our faith and how it came to us and our people for granted. But on the Feast of Pentecost it is helpful, I think, for us to consider the origins of our faith. Because it raises two important questions: do we appreciate the Spirit's silent working in our world? And, do we recognise our empowerment by the Spirit to hand on the gospel?

To think of the Spirit's silent working in the world requires, I think, for us to be far more positive about our world than we often are. We can all too easily as Christians adopt a siege mentality, for us to imagine ourselves as against the world, for us to withdraw and to shake our fist at the world, to shake our heads, to murmur under our breath all that we think is wrong with the world. But perhaps we might say instead that our messy, complex human lives and even more messy, complex relationships, our broken and hurting world, is the context in which God is known; is the sphere in which God's love is revealed; is the place where the Spirit works its power. It requires us to trust that God has actually and truly redeemed the world; that God loved it enough to redeem it; and loves it enough to keep us here.

We must not forget that God's first word to Creation is that it is good. And his last word to it is that has been perfected in love. And to recognise the Spirit's silent working in our world is a helpful reminder that the Spirit is not monopolised by the church; that the Spirit in its own power is drawing all things to fulfilment in Christ. Yes, the church is the chief agent in that. And yes, the church is the privileged arena in which the Spirit is experienced. But whole of creation is infused with the Spirit's power. We are invited to see the world as God sees it.

So, this feast invites us to recognise the silent working of the Spirit in our world. But it also asks us to recognise *our* empowerment by the Spirit to hand on the gospel. In the same way the first question invites us to see the world in more positive light, this second question invites us to *see ourselves* in a more positive light. What the New Testament shows is that someone had to feel compelled, someone had to have the courage, someone had to believe in the Gospel enough to believe it was worth sharing. The carrying out of the Good News of Jesus Christ would not just happen!

From the reading to the Romans we hear today, we get a sense of Paul's struggle to convey to the Roman Christians to live lives worthy of their calling. In the struggles and ordinariness of life it is all too easy to get stuck in an 'unspiritual life'. But Paul urges them toward the incredible integrity and beauty that is possible in the life that is given over to the Spirit. That the Gospel *has* been carried to the ends of the earth, that countless men and women and even children *have* been willing to die for that gospel, and that despite what the critics say the church *has* been the most powerful force for good this world has ever seen, we know that our lives - these earthen vessels! - can be bearers of good news.

My friends, it easy to despair about the world. But God wants us to see it as the dwelling place of his Spirit, who slowly and surely is bringing all things *to complete truth*. It easy to despair at our own capacities and to imagine that the task of carrying the gospel is best left to others. God remains at work in the world, preparing hearts for his Good News to be carried to those who don't know it. We are invited to co-operate in that work. It is a task for us all! God gives us his Spirit to share in the work of bringing the world to himself. And we need to remember that wherever God has placed us, this is place for us to proclaim his good news. Amen.