

Pentecost Sunday

Sermon at St Peter and Paul's Catholic Church Lower Hutt May 20th 2018

Bible Passage: Acts 1.1 – 8

Filled with the Holy Spirit St Peter and St Paul were stalwarts of the gospel being spread by the early church. St Peter was filled in the 'Pentecost event' and St Paul after his dramatic conversion. After a vision the disciple Ananias goes to the house where Paul is and says he has been sent 'so that you may see and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Today we celebrate the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit which so energised the spread of the gospel 'to the ends of the earth.'

This morning I'd like to share with you three aspects of the Holy Spirit's moving and how this affects our living.

1) First then to share a quite remarkable co-incidence, or was it as some have described a '*God-incidence*'. On the day when my Vicar asked me to take his place in preaching here I opened a periodical 'New Scientist.' In the issue there was an article on the great missionary venture in Russia of Peter the Great from 1724, not too many years before Capt Cook came exploring down our way. Peter, a Christian ruler had a vision to open up the land to the east all the way to the Pacific coast. Then they were going to search for the 'Great Land' (Now Alaska). Here was opportunity to spread the gospel and for (fur)trade. Their navigator we know of – he was Danish explorer Vitus Bering. He found what is now Bering Strait but because of fog didn't see Alaska. With this intention and to lay claim to Alaska, 8 years later they again journeyed overland to the east coast of Russia, and built two ships. They were named, yes you guessed it, the *St Peter* and the *St Paul*. It was a nightmare voyage as the ships were separated because of fog. They did reach Alaska and the 'St Paul' returned to Siberia. The 'St Peter' was less fortunate, being disabled on a desolate uninhabited island named later by Capt Cook as Bering Island. They camped there but were assailed by packs of Arctic foxes who 'crowded into our dwellings' – holes in the ground and stole everything they could carry. The survivors were starving much of the time and beset by scurvy. Then Bering died and only after they had constructed a smaller ship built from the remains of 'St Peter' did the survivors get back to Kamchatka some 10 months later. So there's something about St Peter and St Paul you may not have known.

My intention in telling this story is to highlight '*God-incidences* that can happen in our life. I believe they can be of the Spirit's working, prompting things we might do and say. It may be you know a song about the Holy Spirit...'Strong as the wind, gentle as is the dove.' Divine promptings are recorded in Scripture, such as Elijah experiencing the 'still small voice' gentle as is the dove. There was Philip being

prompted to go on the road from Samaria and meeting a converting the man from Ethiopia. And Ananias going to pray for Paul. Then there was Paul being given divine prompting by a vision to leave Jerusalem to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

This divine prompting of the Spirit may well have happened for you, and not immediately recognised. Think for example how someone may have said, 'you were meant to be here', or a thought comes to make contact with someone and it has some significance. I recall this in my pastoral ministry numbers of times being prompted to visit someone, and it turned out to be an anniversary ('How did you know....?') My reflection on this working of the Spirit is not that we should look for it to happen but that we can expect it to happen – that's what comes from the Holy Spirit dwelling in us.

So coincidences become 'God-incidences.'

2) Second, a really key aspect of the *Spirit's working in creation*. It didn't have to wait for Pentecost for the Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters in creation (as related in Genesis 1). How does the Spirit move this way in these days? Its my conviction it was the Spirit's prompting when in 1962 ago Rachel Carson wrote the book called 'Silent Spring' in which she chronicles how birds in Britain and America were dying because of the liberal use of pesticides. This was likely the foundation of the modern ecological movement. Thankfully it is gaining momentum as we increasingly realise the fragile ecological balance of life on Planet Earth. A few years ago a person very involved in Christian Healing Ministry was Agnes Sanford. In an insightful reflection on St Paul's prophetic words she wrote a book entitled 'Creation Waits.' In this Mrs Sanford drew attention to words of Romans 8 which paraphrased read: 'Creation waits until humanity comes to its senses and we help rescue it from its bondage to decay'.

With my early training in geography and having a love of creation I was thrilled when Pope Francis wrote his encyclical on ecology and climate *Laudato Si': On care of our common home.* What a blending of scientific evidence and theology this is and its drawing attention to the scourge of pollution, of climate change and rising sea levels. Again I would suggest that the Spirit's leading is what prompted Francis in care of creation. Anglicans also have a challenge in what we regard as the 5th Face of Mission: 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and renew the life of the Planet.' (1988) As the Spirit moved over the face of the waters then it is for us as humans and Christians to exercise responsibility in the care of creation. 'Earthing' this it means conserving our resources like water, cutting back on use of plastic, less dependence on fossil fuels, and less pollution of the environment. Surely it is the Spirit's prompting as *we care* for the world 'God so loved'.

3) Thirdly the Festival of Pentecost encourages us as we share in it as *festival*, thus recognising *Holy Spirit presence in worship*. I recall words by a former Archbishop of

Canterbury Archbishop now Lord Carey. When he was in office he wrote: 'I am convinced that nothing less than a radical repossession by the Holy Spirit of his church will produce a renewal we all long for, and glimpse excitingly, now and again'. Holy Spirit presence is not only by faith. Surely we can and do experience this. For me it is as Carey describes, glimpses. Those times when be it in the music, or the silence, or the warmth of the Peace, having a sense of love and spontaneity, or a moving story, there we glimpse Holy Spirit presence. Let me briefly share one from last Sunday at St James. We have a 'herald' who reads the Theme sentence of the day – usually a child about the age of 7. She read with such vivacity: 'Lift up your heads you gates, lift up you everlasting doors, that the king of glory may come in!' There was a brief penchant silence, and the congregation burst into spontaneous applause. It was a glimpse of Holy Spirit presence.

We could recall the description in Acts 2 where there was Holy Spirit-presence in the early church through the teaching and in the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. Signs and wonders were happening, there was joy and togetherness among the believers, there was generosity, and those in need were cared for. In our worship today, we can be filled afresh with Holy Spirit as we pray the simple invitation, 'Come Holy Spirit'.

Finally then, as we think of Peter and Paul in their enthusiasm and endeavour (and the ships named in the history of exploration) we are mindful also of this church's dedication to Saints Peter and Paul, in mindfulness of Holy Spirit's promptings in living faithful lives, we're mindful too in our responsibility in care of creation, and as we experience Holy Spirit-presence with God's people, even to the ends of the earth. Amen.

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