

Sermon for Pentecost - All Saints Church Rothbury, 11 May 2008

We have two passages, apparently at odds this morning. The Gospel shows us Jesus breathing on the disciples and giving them the Holy Spirit. In Acts the Holy Spirit comes after the Ascension - as indeed we celebrate it this morning - several days after the ascension.

Theologically, if we were to get hung up about this we might wonder where the Holy Spirit came from: Was it just from Jesus as John says, or from the father as the story in Acts implies. But the church Fathers have sorted all that out for us - we shall say in a minute:

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father **and** the Son. So we can safely put the question to one side and not worry about it.

So then - the next question that the disparity between these two passages raises might be this - when was the gift of God's Holy Spirit actually given to the church? Was it by Jesus before the Ascension as John relates, or was it afterwards, as Luke tells us in Acts?

I don't honestly think it is a problem. Not something to get hung up about. I think it is a both - and answer. Let me explain.

John is writing many years later than Luke. The venue was right - the Upper room, but the timing was different. So what? The church has generally accepted the Acts narrative of Luke as the basis for our observation of Pentecost. But there is an important point to note in John's account.

John clearly remembers though, that in the Upper Room the risen Christ was commissioning his Church. The Holy Spirit was given to those who would lead and pastor his body in the world. It was a new creation, and just as God BREATHED into Adam the pneumos - the breath of life, so Jesus BREATHED life into his body the church. I think the account is quite deliberate - and while the fireworks may not have happened **then**, I think the first breath of the spirit opened their minds to the possibilities of being Church - of being Christ to the world.

'As the Father has sent me, so I send you. And I give you my authority over the forgiveness of sins.' John may be very old, but his memory of this point is crystal clear. And that is why today we have the laying on of hands at ordination and the bishop prays for the coming of the Holy Spirit on the ordinands through this action.

And the succession of laying on of hands, generation by generation, goes back to the time of the 11 disciples - or apostles as they have now become - those who are sent out. That is why we call the church holy and Apostolic. Set apart for God and sent out into the world with the flame of the gospel.

This is not some small Olympic relay with a small torch for a few weeks. This flame has to be handed on, generations by generation, till all the world will know the good news of Jesus Christ.

So, let's turn for a moment to Luke's account. If we accept that John writes of the creation and inspiration of the church - then Luke tells us how God kick-started this church and sent it out into the world in great power.

Funny name - Pentecost - what is it all about? There were three annual feasts in ancient Israel to which every Jewish male who could do so was required to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem to celebrate: the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover), the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths), and the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost).

The Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) took its name from the fact that it occurred seven weeks, or 50 days, after Passover. Each family gathered to offer thanks to God for the grain harvest by giving the first fruits of its produce to the Temple priests. Pentecost was a day of celebration: no work was carried out. And everyone was expected to join in, husbands and wives, parents and children, servants, priests, widows, orphans, even visitors and foreigners.

But for the new Christian church the Pentecost recorded in Acts 2 was not the usual celebration - far from it. It was a celebration like none before or after, because God chose this Pentecost to be day when the Church of Jesus Christ really took off. It was the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to His followers: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth".

The Spirit is poured out on the church - and I think we need to think not of a genteel milk jug at afternoon tea, but a roaring waterfall. God is always generous in his gifts, and when he sent down the Holy Spirit he flooded the place. And this moment became the spark that dynamited the Early Church out of the Upper Room and propelled them back into their world. The indwelling Spirit of Christ was the force that launched them over the edge of their fear and thrust them into the streets with the earth-shattering message: "Jesus Christ is Lord!"

And that is where we link up with Paul in our second reading which started a bit late in the passage. We should actually have heard this - but the people who set the lectionary were a bit coy: I want you therefore to know that no one, speaking through the Spirit of God, can say, "Accursed be Jesus," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," unless through the Holy Spirit.

Why did Paul even mention the phrase *Accursed be Jesus*. Well the orthodox Jews, the first ones to persecute the church, incorporated it into synagogue prayers which were used regularly. The Jewish law laid it down: "Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree." And Jesus had been crucified. When Paul was telling Agrippa about his persecuting days, he said, "I often punished them in every synagogue and *I forced them to blaspheme.*" He made them say *Accursed be Jesus*. It was sometimes a condition of remaining within the synagogue that a man should pronounce a curse on Jesus Christ.

Beside this there is the Christian battle cry, *Jesus is Lord*. In so far as the early Church had a creed at all, that simple phrase was it. The word for Lord was *kurios* and it was a tremendous word. It was the official title of the Roman Emperor. The demand of the persecutors always was, "Say, 'Caesar is Lord (*kurios*).'" It was the word by which the sacred name Jehovah was rendered in the Greek translation of the Old Testament scriptures. When a man could say, "Jesus is Lord," it meant that he gave to Jesus the supreme loyalty of his life and the supreme worship of his heart. And Paul believed that one could only make this great statement, and mean it, "Jesus is Lord," when the Holy Spirit enabled it. The Lordship of Jesus was not so much something which he discovered for himself as something which God, in his grace, revealed to him.

Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth, and would testify about him. Jesus said more: All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is

why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.

So we have this then - Jesus breathed into the church the new life from God. Then the fresh outpouring of the spirit came on the church during the feast day of Pentecost, when Jerusalem was full of pilgrims. And the spirit inspired them to go out and preach - this cowering group of disciples - in the market place.

The church grew in that one day by some 3,000 people. I said the Holy Spirit kick started the church - well so it did. The flame of the Gospel of Christ started on a great journey in both geographical terms but also in time. And the spirit continues to inspire and guide the church - right down to this very day. And we still have the duty to carry the flame of the gospel to all around. After all, it is the Lord's command - and Jesus really IS our Lord.