

Pentecost

May I speak in the name of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Our church is decorated for a celebration, like we are about to have a party: a Pentecost Party. It is the kind of thing you will see churches do: we celebrate Pentecost in our churches. Yet have you ever seen Pentecost mentioned outside the church, like Christmas and Easter. Well of course not, don't be stupid John. This is a church celebration, not one the world joins in. But what are we celebrating?

Pentecost is the day when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit coming on the disciples. The disciples had been hanging around not really knowing what to do until this great day when something, described as tongues of fire, descends on them. For many it is the day when the church was born.

In St John's Cathedral in Hong Kong we had a tradition, not necessarily one that we should emulate here, where the Sunday School would bake birthday cakes for each month of the year and then the children would process into church. You can work out the connection I hope. The church was celebrating her birthday so we remembered that, by bringing in twelve decorated birthday cakes into church.

It was what happened next that I found funny. Usually these cakes were covered in the most garish kind of icing, the kind you don't normally put on your own cakes but the kind that children love (thick oozy icing, in greens, blues and reds and white). About ten minutes after the service, once the children had got to the cakes, there was all manner of hyperactive kids running around the church full of the Holy Spirit, or something.

I would suggest that there were a couple of things amiss with this idea. Not least is that little teaser of a joke at the end; the idea that the Holy Spirit will make you silly or hyperactive or strange. You might have heard about the Holy Spirit taking people into ecstasy or making them speak in strange languages. This is recorded in the Bible and people still today experience it. Still I am not sure that is all there is to it.

So picture again about thirty children processing into church carrying heavily iced cakes. What puzzles me about this picture is that they are walking into the church and not out of it. That seems to me to be the wrong way round.

In our dominant reading today from the Acts of the Apostles we hear of the gift of the Holy Spirit. If you look at it just a little more closely you can see two things happening here.

Firstly, the disciples are in one place, safe secure and then following the gift of the Spirit, they are freed to move on. That great phrase from the 1950's "Elvis has left the building." Well at Pentecost the Church left the building. Now that is worth us reflecting on. At some point, and God willing, this great Cathedral Church will reopen. But is it the case that we will go

back? It would be pointless to go back without thinking about what we have learned in exile. Personally I think our task is to reopen the Cathedral, to open the doors, with all the resonances that suggests, rather than go back in. Whenever we do return, lets us return to an open welcoming cathedral and let us never be confined there.

There is another thing to note from our reading from Acts. The Bible only spends a few sentences on the actual manifestation of the Holy Spirit (the tongues of fire and the wind). The rest of it is about what happens. What happens is that they leave the comfort of their room and go out into the city and preach. They get on with mission. Whatever party took place it was sure joyous, but also it was brief.

What has kept the church and the Christians in the building—to my mind has been fear. Fear and crippling anxiety.

Fear shuts us in.

We in the church are not immune from fear. At this time the Anglican Church can be seen as a slightly fearful place. We have lost our position as one of the main churches in the world. We are fearful about declining numbers in the West (even as we forget growth in Asia and Africa).

We have arguments that are public and divisive. At the moment we are arguing about Women Bishops (at least in the Church of England), we have a rather dry argument about the Anglican Covenant (have you even heard about that) and of course, of course, we tear ourselves apart over issues of human sexuality.

So often our response is governed by anxiety and fear, we hold onto what we have with a tight fist, and the open handed welcome is lost.

Fear turns us inwards, the spirit asks us to face outwards.

Fear cripples us, the spirit liberates us.

Fear forces us to think along its lines and only in its language. The spirit gives us many voices and opportunities.

We can approach all this with fear, fear for our position, fear for our future. Or we can let the spirit flow.

At Pentecost the church left the building. Even as we reopen the doors of this Cathedral our task will be not to go backwards, but to ask where the Spirit want to take us next.

And one day, God willing we will have thirty children at our Sunday School who will be able to carry healthily decorated cakes out of the church to give to people on the feast day of Pentecost. Now there is an idea.

Dean John

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