

Sunday 31 May 2020

Pentecost

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Texts:

1 Corinthians 12.1-13

John 20.19-23

I wonder, is there a particular skill that you have a knack for? Something that you can just do, effortlessly and skilfully? Something that others admire in you?

Often a knack is something that seems to be innate. Two people might make a cake in exactly the same way but one just has the knack of making it rise better every time. Sometimes, a knack can be taught, allowing others to enhance their skills.

I remember when I was about ten and learning to knit. I had been progressing slowly until one day I sat with my Nanna, an expert knitter, and she showed me the way she held the yarn so that she had control of it but it also slipped easily through her fingers, maintaining an even tension as she worked. It took a little while to learn how to do it, but once I mastered the knack of it, my knitting was transformed! I can still remember the sense of freedom and ease that came with knowing how to do it.

Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul speaks about the varied gifts that are given by the Holy Spirit. Each person receives from the same God, different gifts that they are to use for the common good. Paul speaks about; wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, the discernment of spirits and the speaking and interpretation of tongues.

The different gifts of the Spirit are not to be a cause of envy amongst believers but instead, they are to be offered for the benefit of the whole Body of Christ. Different individuals have different gifts, different things that come easily to them, the knack for certain things. As these gifts are offered, believers learn from each other and develop new skills of their own, building up and strengthening the church.

Today is Pentecost, WhitSunday, when we celebrate God's gift to us of the Holy Spirit and also, the gifts that the Spirit gives to each of us. We have heard today, the account in the book of Acts of the coming of the Holy Spirit with flames of fire, the sound of a rushing wind and with the gift of language. This is

the account that is perhaps the most familiar and is usually given the most attention as we celebrate Pentecost. However, our reading from the Gospel of John gave us another account of the coming of the Holy Spirit, and that is the one I would like to on today.

As with so many stories in our scriptures, the writers do not agree on what happened, or when, or where. The Acts account of the giving of the Holy Spirit takes place on the Day of Pentecost, the Jewish Feast of Weeks, or Shavuot, which falls on the fiftieth day after Passover. The disciples are all together and Peter addresses the large crowd of people from all the nations of the world which has gathered around them.

In John's account, the disciples are gathered together on the evening of Easter Day when Jesus comes and stands amongst them, breathes on them and gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit.

These discrepancies between the stories are one of the things that I think is most wonderful about our scriptures. There is no attempt to have only one voice recorded or to decide whose account is right and, therefore, whose is wrong. Multiple voices speak to us and enrich our understanding, adding nuance and complexity to the underlying truth of the stories. The story of God's love is infinitely rich and complex, it is far beyond being expressed in simple, one-size-fits-all terms.

There is so much in John's short account of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

John describes how Jesus comes to the disciples through locked doors. They are imprisoned behind their fear, but Jesus comes to them to set them free.

He meets them in the evening. In Jewish culture, a new day begins not at dawn but at dusk, so Jesus comes to them at the beginning of a new day, a new, Spirit filled life lies ahead of them.

Jesus offers the disciples his peace, shows them his wounds, and once again pronounces his peace on them. Not even resurrection removes the marks of suffering, although it does transform them. The wounds of the resurrected Christ are the signs of our healing, and it is through his wounds that we are able to receive the gift of God's peace; a peace that the world cannot know or give and that cannot be destroyed by human brokenness and suffering.

God the Father sent his son Jesus into the world, now Jesus sends his disciples as he was sent, breathing the Holy Spirit into them, empowering them. When Jesus breathes into them it reminds us of God breathing the spirit of life into the

first human. Now the disciples are animated and brought into resurrection life through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, Jesus tells them that if they forgive sins, they are forgiven, and if they retain sins, they are retained. This is a verse that is used in the ordination of priests. It is a verse that has caused much anguish and wrestling by many people over the years. What does it mean for us as Jesus' disciples to forgive or retain sins? What does it mean for the institutional church?

To understand this verse properly we need to remember how John understands sin. In John's Gospel, Jesus talks about sin not as a moral failure but as an inability to see or accept God at work in Jesus. Sin, in this view, is essentially a problem of unbelief; choosing to remain in sin means choosing to continue to reject God and the freedom and abundant life that God offers.

When Jesus sends his disciples out through the Spirit and tells them that they will forgive or retain sins, he is saying that they are called to be a part of revealing God in Jesus. To the extent that they make Jesus known to others, enabling them to see God at work in him, to that extent people will believe, be set free, released from sin, forgiven. When they fail to do this, when they fail to reveal God through their witness to the resurrected Jesus, people's unbelief will persist, they will not be set free, their sins will be retained.

It is the responsibility of the disciples to proclaim the freedom and abundant life that they have received through Jesus and that they are now empowered by the Spirit to share with others. It is our responsibility too. Some of us will have more of a knack for it than others but we can all share our skills and learn how to do it better.

We live in a world full of people who have failed to grasp the knowledge of God; people whose lives continue to be limited and bound because they do not know the abundance, freedom and peace that is God's gift to us. As we celebrate Pentecost, we celebrate the gift of the Spirit to the church. As Jesus sends his disciples out in the power of that Spirit, so we, the church, are sent to make God known to the world.

We each have different gifts from the same Spirit. There are things we have a knack for and things we will always struggle to do. Just as our scriptures record different accounts of God at work in the world, so our lives record different accounts too. That is part of the rich diversity of God's creation. And, each of us, empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit is sent by Jesus into the world to use our whole selves to reveal to others the God who loves us, and to set God's people free.

The Lord be with you.