



Mighty wind or hot air?

Acts 2:1-21

As we gather for our Mission Anniversary, appropriately it falls on Pentecost, which was a moment of high significance for the early church. They were gathered together in one place; followers of Jesus who were wondering just what the outlook was following the events of the crucifixion and resurrection.

Then out of heaven came the howling of a fierce wind. Flames of fire came to rest upon those present. They were filled with power and spoke of God's activity in the world. People from all around, even from the edges of the far-flung Jewish diaspora, heard the message in their own language. The descent of the Holy Spirit is the remarkable centre of all Christian mission.

Who could have anticipated such power being released? The reaction of the crowd provides me with my text:-

“Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, ‘What does this mean?’” (Acts 2:12)

Is it really a mighty wind of change or the hot air of a church looking for a purpose? For those of us concerned about mission today, it remains important to seek the presence of the same Spirit.

Previously, we hear the instruction that the disciples are to remain in Jerusalem for the gift of the Spirit (Acts 1:8).

- Without the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship is inconceivable
- There is no life without the life-giver
- God's people can never display Christlikeness without his fruit
- There is no vibrant witness in the world without this power

As one Christian writer put the matter, “As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead.”

Both John and Luke present the coming of the Spirit upon the impotent church in terms of wind. The Lukan version is that of a mighty wind, whereas John speaks of a gentle breath. The distinct difference is that in Acts all the people in the area take notice, but John's account is a moment of personal and quiet inspiration. Each has something to say to us, but we focus upon the Acts of the Apostles.

“They have had too much wine.” (v.13). When the sceptics observed this, they concluded they were drunk! The first disciples were captivated with a new power and purpose that could not be denied.

Let us look at the experience of those looking on and divide my text rather neatly into three:-

They were amazed

The promised Spirit comes upon the church in the midst of throngs of pilgrims in Jerusalem gathered for an important festival, which was profoundly informative and celebrated God, who had called them into nationhood.



At such a time, the earliest church is called to its own high purpose and those who observed “were amazed”.

- They had always seen God encounter them in their traditions and liturgical patterns
- However, here they are met in a most unexpected manner
- God reaches beyond their “religious infrastructure”
- God’s Spirit blows where it wills

We do need to rediscover a sense of God’s activity, which disturbs us from where we are to where we ought to be. The birth of the church comes out of this experience at Pentecost, as the first and then a wider group of disciples come into an experience which indelibly imprints itself upon their lives. From this moment on, they will never be the same again.

- God cannot be neatly placed within the parameters of our understanding
- God will open doors of faith and new windows on service
- God’s presence will make them fearless
- The disciples will be conscious of a new leading and a new dynamic purpose

In the crowd, any would-be disciples were “amazed” at what they saw and experienced, and that God was using ordinary people in such a way.

As we gather for this Anniversary, we recognise the power of our “Word and deed ministry” and that God continues to deliver his liberating power, his gracious compassion and his transformative forgiveness to people through our work. I see it as clients are given hope, staff and volunteers are empowered through the opportunity of service, and communities see the hope of transformation.

A distinguished church consultant was once asked, “Why do we have such uninteresting preaching and so many static and sedate congregations?” His surprising answer did not cite some institutional or organisational problem. He simply responded, “Neglect of the third person of the Trinity.”

Without the empowering and prodding of the Holy Spirit, we are always in danger of becoming just another well-meaning, mostly helpful, good-will society.

There are many organisations like Wesley Mission, who have chosen to lay to one side their Christian heritage, believing that culturally acceptable secularism is sufficient. What occurs at Pentecost will be transformative for all time and it is little wonder that people were amazed.

They were perplexed

I do get concerned at those who have everything worked out. The crowd were “perplexed” at what they observed. The disciples of Jesus then – and followers today – are always called to new avenues of service and witness.

This confusion felt by the disciples and the crowd was not surprising, for they were living between two worlds, as the old passes and a new world is being born.



People will be perplexed when we make a link between the gifting of the Spirit and our engagement in the deeds of God, involving the struggle for justice and the building of a kingdom of righteousness.

A Cambridge scholar spoke of the link between “Resurrection” and “the Moral Order”. He declared, “The work of the Spirit as ‘witness’ to the objective deed of God in Christ, and his work as ‘life-giver’ who restores freedom and power to mankind ... are not two distinct works but one.”

We must not lose touch with reality. Our striving for the gospel is not just an individual action, but an expression of the groaning we feel for the whole creation.

There are many indications of our desire to see changes in our society and we are in the midst of an election campaign that leads us to ask:-

- What place do broken and bruised families have?
- What focus is there upon the thousands dependent upon the practical support of people like ourselves?
- What overriding world view is going to dominate Australia’s future?

In a perplexed community, we must find the words and deeds that will make some kind of sense.

John Stott contended, “Before Christ sent the church into the world, he sent the Spirit into the church. The same order must be observed today.”

Charles Swindoll told the story that in his opinion “the best evangelistic center in the greater metropolitan Boston area is not a church. It is a filling station in Arlington. It was owned and operated by a man named Bob who caught the vision early in his life that his vocation and his calling were to be welded together. As time passed, his station became known as the place to go for fuel, new tires, or other car service. I have seen a half-dozen cars lined up bumper to bumper near two pumps in front of that little station just waiting to be served by that man. He has no banners out, no ‘Jesus Saves’ flags, no signs, no ‘ichthuses’, nothing plastered all over the station or in the windows, no sign, ‘Bring your car to Bob and take your soul to Jesus.’ He simply did his job! He did it well and people knew he was in partnership with the Lord. He led dozens of people to faith in Jesus Christ.”

It prompted them to ask “What does it mean?”

The reactions of the crowd were responses to Christlike Servanthood in its working clothes. It called for questioning at the most significant level.

- What are the implications of the gift of the Spirit?
- Where do we interpret and demonstrate the challenges of faith and service?
- What does belonging mean to us as a community?

There is a great need for power; both moral and spiritual power! The New Testament is a story about power; a theme which runs through its pages.

- On one side is confusion, helplessness and doubt about the future
- On the other side is unshakeable purpose and the birth of courage



This theme or line runs through the Day of Pentecost. Just a couple of weeks ago, I flew to Brisbane and enjoyed looking at the Great Dividing Range as we approached the airport in Queensland. In one sense, Pentecost is the great divide of history.

The question of those observing in the crowd is the one we still have to ask. We will all need to venture into courageous, counter-cultural and demanding lives, if we are to be alive to the future and all it has to offer.

The Whitsunday Islands are to be found off the coast of Northern Queensland. There is the Whitsunday Passage that Cook chose to name. Nearby is Pentecost Island with its steep craggy slopes, rising sheer out of the sea. No wonder an early Portuguese explorer called Australia "The Land of the Holy Spirit".

Maldwyn Edwards wrote about the experience of John Wesley – "In all his earlier disciplined life of holiness and the good works to which he set his hand, his primary concern was on what he could do for God. But after the Aldersgate Street heart-warming, he asked only what God could do for him and through him."

- At a stroke, strain and effort had gone
- No longer the anxious spirit of heaviness
- Ecclesiastic of America to evangelist of the open road

It is 39 years since an unknown 32 year old film director, George Lucas, launched a film; the characters were unknown, the soundtrack and the robots likewise unfamiliar. It is hard to believe that it has become the biggest film of all time – financially – Star Wars.

- From the beginning, it drew people to it
- The story began with huge words on screen – star wars – episode 4!
- It was far more interesting to start a story in the middle

If Episode 1 was the life and ministry of Jesus, culminating in his life, death and resurrection, then Episode 2 is the new life of Pentecost.

Central to all the truly immersive, fandom-generating universes of popular culture – Doctor Who, Star Wars, Star Trek, Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter and even the re-emergence of the Marvel superheroes – is, to borrow a concept from Tolkien, the promise of fellowship.

I met a close friend of Tolkien and I am fascinated that his works, which helped to re-float the New Zealand tourist industry, has captivated a whole new generation.

Social isolation that is so much a feature of modern life is unconsciously addressed. Even such rugged individualists as Sherlock Holmes and James Bond are surrounded by webs of familiar and supporting players.

An intrinsic part of the nature of our Christian faith is that we belong together. We encounter the promise of the Holy Spirit and that is no mere hot air. Throughout our history, we have been conscious of the gift of God that has made us who we are and, in our contemporary Australia, what we have to offer is the transforming work of the Spirit – and in our communities this has never been needed more!



A number of weeks ago in an evening service, I referred to Bishop Will Willimon, who wrote about a long discussion one evening in an Alabama church on the many deficiencies of the Methodist Church. This conversation had gone on for some time when a woman jumped to her feet and blurted out in frustration, “I spent 38 years thinking God was mad at me. I tried this and that to get God to like me. When I came here for the first time I heard about grace. This church, for all its problems, is the place where God finally brought me to my senses about what God really thinks about me. Now it’s my job to tell everyone else that God is not mad at us; God loves us.”

I have been busy preparing an address for a different context on the theme The Church in the Main Street. It is a theme for every church and mission. Bishop Gavin Reid, who for many years was the Bishop of Maidstone, had a special responsibility from the then Archbishop of Canterbury in relation to mission. He was dealing with the issue of Evangelism and Mission in the 1970s. It was an emerging and developing age of communication. He wrote *The Gaggling of God*, which is not greatly referenced today, but did make one very useful distinction by saying much of our mission is “in-drag” rather than “outreach”.

- This challenges our concept of God, who sends us
- It demands that we understand the language and culture, not necessarily embracing it but taking it seriously.

People in every setting need us to show them that there is a God of love. The call of God to the church is to go and be what we proclaim.

204 years ago, a work began at the heart of Sydney which we celebrate today. Like Pentecost, nobody could fully understand its impact. That work has not ended. Let us pick up the batten and run the race set before us!