



A Homily by The Very Reverend Tim Dobbin

The Feast of Pentecost

May 23, 2021

Scripture Passages: Acts 2:1-21 & John 15:26-27, 16:4-15

Ask folk what the big splashes in the church year are, and chances are that they'll come up with a couple: Christmas and Easter. Some Anglicans even talk about C and E'ers – not to be confused with C of E'ers, members of the Church of England; but C and E'ers, those who darken the church's doors at Christmas and Easter. In fact, there are not just two big splashes in our calendar; there are three.

The third is today – the Day of Pentecost. Today we celebrate the outpouring of the Spirit upon those huddled disciples – the rush of a violent wind, tongues of fire alighting on their heads (it's why bishops wear pointy hats – they represent those flames), the din of different languages being spoken.

This outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost is not only about God making his presence known in a dramatic way; it is about God creating a community. Through the giving of the Spirit, God creates a community of believers, whom the Spirit empowers to go out into all the world – to spread the good news of Jesus Christ in word and action.

That community of believers of course has a name – its name is the church. Today we thank God for the gift of his Spirit and we celebrate the birthday of the church – this rag-tag community of believers whom God sends out to bless this beautiful and broken world God loves so much. Today is the day on which the Church was born.

There's a temptation when we listen to the story from Acts this morning. It's the tendency to hear the ending as 'and they all lived happily ever after.'

In truly dramatic fashion – howling wind like a jet engine, dancing licks of flame, babbling voices in multiple tongues – God delivers on the Jesus-promised Spirit. And suddenly the freshly emboldened disciples are off – preaching up a storm in Jerusalem and then to the ends of the earth. Lives transformed, barriers overcome, mission launched... all the hallmarks of Hollywood.

Only it's not quite how it plays out, right? The disciples run into some pretty significant headwinds – struggle, persecution and in too many instances martyrdom. Rather than tying it all up in a bow, the Holy Spirit seems to trigger a host of challenges, which the disciples on this morning 2 000 years ago could have scarce dreamed of. They had no idea what was ahead of them. Life could and would have been so much easier without Jesus' commissioning and the Holy Spirit's empowering to live and share the good news. Sure, they preach, they bear witness and many respond... only it comes with significant cost.

Hardly the 'happy' ending... Which perhaps means, we should not be overly surprised ourselves when we too experience the cost of following the Spirit's lead in whatever form it comes. David Lose reminds us that when Martin Luther revised the traditional 'marks of the church', he added one. Along with preaching of the Gospel and the faithful administration of the sacraments as indicators of the true church, Luther included the 'cross.'

If we are about the work of the Gospel, we too can expect pushback; we need prepare ourselves for struggle. As we have discovered through this pandemic, life in churchland is not, and likely will never be, plain-sailing. Struggle is part of our DNA as church.

I hope this helps us to see what we have been living for the past 14 months in a slightly different light. It's been hard, right? We've had to dig deep at times to maintain our faithfulness, our commitment to our respective faith communities, our connectedness with God and with each another. What this story in Acts reminds us is that struggle and challenge doesn't mean we've screwed up, or got it all wrong or that God has gone AWOL. It's what we the church have been living since our birth on the Day of Pentecost 2000 years ago.

I hope this also helps us to see the Holy Spirit in a slightly different light. John in his Gospel uses the Greek word *parakletos* to describe the Third Person of the Trinity. It translates literally as 'the one called alongside' – *parakletos* or 'Paraclete' as we anglicize it. In the story from Acts, we see the Spirit of the Living God, the Holy Spirit, the *parakletos* not so much smoothing everything over, resolving all the issues, making it all go away. Hardly! The *parakletos*, the One called alongside, does just that... the Spirit this morning comes alongside those early disciples, mustering their courage, strengthening their resolve, galvanizing them into action. The Holy Spirit transforms their lives, from the inside out. These ordinary folk, just like you and me, are no longer the people they once were.

They are now empowered to respond to the new challenges and the fresh struggles before them... in fact, they create an all-too-public scene with the scandalous good news that the person the crowds had condemned to death is now alive through the power of God.

The Holy Spirit then as an answer to our problems? And they all lived happily ever after? Again as David Lose reminds us, if anything, the Spirit's work this morning seems to create for the disciples a new problem – there's a story to tell, there's compassion and justice to share, there's love to spread and they simply can't sit still until they're out there living it.

Seeing the *parakletos*, the One called alongside, the Holy Spirit in a slightly different light. What if rather than solve our problems, she opens our eyes to see possibilities we didn't see before? What if rather than taking away our anxiety, she gives us courage to take the next step? What if rather than assuring us of safety, she promises God's presence?

And I know this... only I can forget this. I find myself yearning for it all to be over, for everything to be just like it used to be, for reliability and predictability and normality... If I only work hard enough, or pray long enough, or plan ahead far enough, there will be that happy ending... Only it doesn't seem that's how the Spirit of the Living God works.

I wonder if any of you have heard of Dr. Paul Farmer? He's one of life's stand-outs. He's a doctor who probably could have enjoyed a comfortable and impactful medical practice in the US. Instead, he has spent his life responding to the world's most resistant infectious diseases amongst the poorest communities on this planet – Cuba, Haiti, Peru, Russia, West Africa... People have called Dr. Farmer a 'wonder worker.' In his biography, Tracy Kidder observes that Farmer would say he simply persists, refuses to give up. After some measure of success, rather than rest on his laurels, he is out there looking for the next challenge, the next possibility. In fact, Kidder chose a Haitian proverb for the title of Dr. Farmer's biography – a proverb that has inspired Farmer and captures the truth that in this life even as we surmount one challenge, another often emerges. The book is entitled *Mountains beyond mountains*.

This is not to say that 'life is just one damned thing after another.' It is not to say that problems never go away. It is not to say our lot is one of unrelenting ministry and service. Rather, today we celebrate and give thanks for the gift of the *parakletos*, the One called alongside, the Holy Spirit. In the mountain range we find ourselves in, successive waves, multiple variants, enforced isolation, she is the One who helps us see possibilities where we may have only seen problems; she is the One who strengthens us to climb the mountains beyond the mountains with confidence; she is the One who empowers us to make a difference in the lives of those most vulnerable, even in the midst of this dreadful pandemic. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.