

SERMON FOR PENTECOST A ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD

Two very different but influential figures in 20th century Christianity, Karl Barth and Billy Graham, both stated that the 20th century should be the century during which “the Holy Spirit is brought to prominence.”

The 20th century brought the advent of the Pentecostal movement, with its emphasis on the baptism of the Holy Spirit and on speaking in tongues. Despite the fact that this movement experienced notable growth, the Holy Spirit -- the third person of the Trinity -- continued to be neglected in 20th century Christianity.

This neglect in church history is demonstrated by the place that the Holy Spirit comes in our creed. It is almost ‘tagged on’ at the end. Perhaps because the Holy Spirit is something that we cannot properly contain and make an image of. It alludes us.

The Holy Spirit can pose a threat to societal and ecclesial powers. It certainly challenges exalted traditions, such as apostolic succession, The Spirit really shakes things up!

When the structures are used for the inclusion of some and exclusion of others, the Spirit is able to make

possible the inclusion of the formally excluded. The Spirit, for example, might facilitate calling many into ministries who had not received ministerial validation through the route of apostolic succession.

Jesus told the Samaritan Woman in John 4:23: “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.” We talk about the Spirit moving us to make such decisions as woman priests and possibly the inclusion of LGBT people in the body of Christ. Seen in this way, the Holy Spirit is a mysterious almost uncontrollable force.

2

We see it in today’s reading from Acts, which relates an experience of such power that the Apostles changed their whole way of life. Instead of being sad, dejected withdrawn mourners they became joyful, purposeful, outgoing life givers. It is clear that it is this event we call Pentecost, the coming of God’s Spirit that caused the change. They described it, as we read in Acts, in terms of symbols. The symbols they used for the action of the Holy Spirit were wind, fire, and foreign languages.

I believe that when we look at these symbols and compare the experience of the disciples with the hard to classify nature of the Holy Spirit, we begin to see why there was such a change in the disciples. I also believe that we in fact have these experiences ourselves, though not in the intensity of either the disciples nor perhaps other Christian traditions.

3

Lets then examine these words used to describe the action on the Holy Spirit and see what they raise for us.

Wind

The wind blows where it will, you see the effects of it, but not where it comes from nor where it is going. We do not see the wind. It's powerful, dynamic, in that it can drive windmills and propel yachts through water. It can cause destruction as we see in tornadoes and hurricanes. There is about wind a freedom, a freedom, a continual movement and restlessness.

Freedom

In peoples experiences of the Holy Spirit. They feel they have the power to choose where to go without

restraints. They are not bound by time and space. They are free like the wind.

Disciples

The disciples found themselves to be free too. They were freed from their past. They did not have to keep doing things the way they always had. They could not keep holding on to beliefs they had cherished because of the teaching of Jesus. Like the wind, they had been set free.

4

Fire

Fire is the symbol of light and warmth. The warmth tells us of the companionship of belonging. The light speaks of the ability to see clearly. It's about being guided in the right direction. Light shows us the way.

Light

In experiences of God people speak about being enveloped in a brilliant light. They talk about being "bathed" in light. It's not a light that blinds them, but rather one that guides and illuminates. It illuminates the understanding so people will know the true nature of things.

For the disciples the tongues of fire rested on each of them. They were enlightened with the truth of what had happened in the whole life death and resurrection

of Jesus. The light guided them out of themselves to meet others and to share what they knew.

5

Foreign Languages

If you've been in a foreign country where you cannot speak the language, you will know the joy of hearing your own language spoken. Even if your own language is spoken by a stranger, you will drift towards that person just to eavesdrop on the conversation. Here is someone who could understand if you were to converse with them. Using the same language draws people together. It expresses so much about ourselves that we cannot even put into words. Using the same language brings a real sense of unity to people.

Unity

It is this unity which is part of our Christian experience. People speak of belonging to a greater whole. There's no longer any need to concentrate on themselves because they feel at one with all things, though not lost in all things.

Speaking foreign languages brought the disciples into contact with all the foreign people in Jerusalem. But

they were no longer foreign. The disciples were able to communicate the love of God and so bring those considered to be outsiders, into a sense of belonging.

6

Here is the beginning of that desire for something 'universal' that brings people into harmony. Here it's expressed by language.

Out of this experience of the freedom of the wind, the light of the fire and the unity of common language, the disciples gained new life, a changed life, a different perspective on life.

Out of the experiences of freedom, of light, of unity, people gain new life, changed life, a different perspective on life.

Both of these experiences may seem to us somewhat extreme. I think their extremity can help us see the fact that we either have had or desire, the same experience. Our own experience may not be as intense, but it is there. Pentecost points us to our own experience. Where then is our experience of the Spirit of God?

6

It is of course to do with our experiences of freedom, light and unity. Think of those times you have watch a sunset and been so awestruck that you feel drawn into the experience. Think of being present either at birth or death, and sensing that unity which binds us all together. Think of making a discovery which helps us see which way to turn in life, and we realize its the guidance we have been looking for.

The experiences we have of freedom, light and unity will vary with each of us in the differing circumstances of our lives. The challenge is to look for, seek out, encourage, those occasions when we are
Free from the things which bind,
Guided into the light of truth,
Brought into unity with others.

We give thanks to God for the many occasions in our lives when we have seen the Spirit of God present and active, working through us, working through this community of faith. As we continue to seek God's will for us, so we call on God's spirit to be present to give us wind, fire, and language, to bring freedom, truth and unity.