

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Pentecost Day (Year B)
Sunday May 23rd 2021

Obedient to the Lord's own instructions at his Ascension, the apostles are waiting in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit. They are not inactive; this is no passive rest time, they are staying together and praying together for the gift they have been promised. There is something rather beautiful about a group of people praying together, something very profound about being with other people all of whom have their eyes fixed on God. So for the apostles these days have been busy, and intense, and probably exhausting too. For the city outside this room, however, the Jesus story seems to have gone very quiet. Perhaps the religious leaders, who had been so disturbed by Jesus and by his followers, are breathing a sigh of relief; perhaps, at some level, they are congratulating themselves on having silenced the apostles, on throttling this new movement before it really got going. Perhaps they are saying to themselves 'It looks as if it is over, it is dead'.

Then, one morning, the room is shaken: a fire is kindled, a wind that is so powerful it is deafening shakes the room and everyone in it, and the twelve burst out; but they are changed men, completely different from the men who met to pray earlier that same morning. It is as if there had been an explosion in the room, and the twelve come pouring out, driven out with an energy and a drive and a liveliness that catches everyone by surprise. They are not silent now, but the words are gushing out of them, pouring out in a torrent and running all through the streets of the city, with an energy that leaves the crowds bewildered, amazed and astonished. If people had thought the Jesus movement had gone quiet because it was dead, they were very wrong: it had gone quiet because it was growing stronger than ever. The twelve apostles entered the room that morning as just that, a group of twelve men: they left that room as something completely different, they left the room no longer as twelve individuals, they left as the Church.

The twelve apostles, together with Our Blessed Lady, gathered in the room that day breathing the air of old Jerusalem. But when the room is filled with the Spirit they breathe something new; as the Spirit blows through the room it sweeps away the air of old Jerusalem and replaces it with the breath of God. The apostles and Our Lady breathe deeply the breath of God, and that breath fills the lungs of the new Church and enlivens it, just as in the creation story God breathed life into the nostrils of man and turned him into a living being. The breath of God which they inhale that day is exhaled as the Word of God, as they burst out into the city telling the marvels of God. If the religious leaders thought that the Jesus movement had withered away, they were very wrong indeed.

What does this story have to say to us now, some 2,000 years later?

Pentecost was the day that twelve individuals become one church. The Spirit breathes life into the Body of Christ, and it rises up full of life. Each of the apostles has his own story, and

those stories will branch off in different ways, but what really matters is that each of those stories is the story of Christ alive and at work in someone's life. Whatever we do, whatever part we play in the growth of the Kingdom of God, what really matters is not our own gifts or talents or achievements, what really matters is how effective we are in making the love of Christ present, concrete, visible, tangible, audible wherever we are.

The power of the apostles-who-have-now-become-the-Church flows from the air they have breathed. They have inhaled deeply the thick and powerful breath of God. It is not possible to speak the Word of God until you have first inhaled the breath of God. To be a person who speaks the Word of God one must be a person who breathes in his breath in prayer; and to be a community that preaches with power to amaze, we must be a community that breathes in the breath of God, enlivened by the freshness of his breath more than by the stale air of the spirit of the age.

And if we are ever tempted to be discouraged, and to feel that the Church is on the back foot, to feel that it is in some way in retreat – and lets be honest, it does sometimes look like that, then let us remember that first Pentecost Day. Since the disappearance of the risen Christ it had all gone quiet; one could be forgiven for thinking that the followers of Jesus had melted away, but it was not so. They were not dispersed, they were waiting, waiting for the gift of the Spirit to give them the power that they needed. In different places and in different times the fortunes of the Church have ebbed and flowed. 500 years ago the Catholic Church was about to almost disappear in this country, to go from being present in every town and village to being just a hunted few in a short space of time. But the Spirit always comes to those who wait for him, to inspire and strengthen them, to guide them and to lead them. Even if we have become stubborn, or cool, or straying, so long as openness is there the Spirit can bend, and warm and guide us. The Church looks very different in different times, but remains always the Body of Christ. It is fashionable to refer to Britain as a 'Post-Christian country', but that seems about as foolish as saying that the day before Pentecost was a 'post Jesus' time. It is not a Post-Christian country at all, it is a Pre-Christian one, longing and thirsty if it did but know it for the Good News of freedom for the imprisoned, a voice for the silenced, a way for the lost and a home for all people. Like the first apostles we wait for the Spirit, not knowing where he will lead us. Every day is another Pentecost, another rebirth for the Church.