

Message for Pentecost Sunday 2020

The Feast of Pentecost brings the Easter season to a great triumphant close. The Lord has ascended to be with his Father, and so that we are not alone he sends the Holy Spirit to be with us. It is a wonderful visual image, the apostles gathered together in the upper room, and then the quiet of the room is overwhelmed with sound and wind and fire and they are changed men, never to be the same again. It is a wonderful thing this gift of the Holy Spirit, but it rather feels as if we are just celebrating something that happened two thousand years ago. We have all received the Holy Spirit at Baptism and at Confirmation, but what does Pentecost mean when we celebrate it year after year? What message does it speak into my life today?

I think that part of the problem we face in trying to celebrate this feast comes from the fact that we look at our world, our lives, our situation, the experience of every day life, as if it were complete: this is it, this is how I am, this is how the world is. So what does the Holy Spirit have to add? Maybe a bit of spice, a bit of extra interest here and there, or propping me up a bit when life goes off-course, but for the most part where I am now is the way things are going to stay.

What if that is not the right way of looking at it, though? What if life as it is now were not the norm, the default? What if life as I know it now is not actually life at its fullest and brightest, but instead was a sort of sleep, anticipating and waiting to be woken up? What if Pentecost is actually saying to us: get ready to be woken up to something new and better and brighter?

This resonates with me in a big way in this present time. I look out into our empty churches, and they look to me like buildings that are longing and groaning to be woken up, to spring back to life. We need them, our towns need them, our world needs them. If you take away from us the practice of our faith, the contact with the sacraments and the word of God proclaimed, it is like taking the conductor away from an orchestra. For a while the orchestra sounds fine, it carries on ok, but then slowly everyone starts to do their own thing and it all drifts out of control. Without the daily round of prayer and Mass, the same happens to our communities and our lives: little by little we all do our own thing, lose sight of the common vision, and a beautiful symphony becomes a cacophony.

So perhaps our lives are like our churches: the way we live from day to day, so often distracted and rushed and anxious and confused, is not normality, that is not the way the human being was created to live. Perhaps, instead, the normal way of living is to be poised and ready and waiting to be woken to something new.

The prophet Ezekiel spoke to the people of Israel, living in exile, and he told them about a vision he had had. He had been taken to a valley which was filled with bones; and the bones were dry, and completely lifeless. But these lifeless bones were, in fact, just waiting: they were waiting for someone to speak the words of God over them, and when Ezekiel does that the bones begin to knit themselves together again, and then when he summons the breath they are filled with breath

and they rise together no longer a valley of lifeless dry bones, but now a mighty army. This was a message for the people of Israel, a message that living far from home in exile was, indeed, a dry and sterile experience but it was not God's will for them for ever: his will was that they should come to life again and go home.

So I think that this celebration of Pentecost wants us to take this message to heart: life as we are living it now, however good and virtuous and happy and fulfilling it may be, is not the definitive version, it is not the finished product. To a greater or lesser extent we are also waiting for new life to be breathed into us. We may be more aware of this than ever this year, as we wait to go back to work, or back to seeing friends and family, or back to more familiar ways of living, but the fact is it is always true. However good my life is, there is always some part of it that is waiting, waiting to be filled with new life. On the first Pentecost day the apostles were gathered together, waiting. They knew that they needed to be filled with something new; they were up for this challenge, whatever it might be, open to the surprising gifts of the Spirit, just ready and waiting. So I think that the message that this feast has for us is to be aware that our lives could be so much better if we open ourselves up to God, as the first apostles did. What dreams might he have for you? What challenges is he offering to you? How could you make those fruits of the Spirit more concrete, more real in the world around you? How can you make a space for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The lives that we are living now, however good they may be, are not the finished product. For all of us there is the space for a breath of new life, so that the dry bones of our deepest longings and highest dreams may come to life.