

Sunday 31 May 2009: Pentecost

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh (Acts 2. 17)

Readings: Acts 2.1-18; John 20.19-23

It is not often that the Gospel is upstaged by the reading before it for the Epistle. The passage from Acts read in the first languages of members of our congregations was fantastic - beautiful and energising - but it was one of two accounts of the gift of the Holy Spirit that we have heard read this morning and which are vividly different.

According to John, the disciples, less Thomas, were gathered in the upper room at evening on Easter Day. Jesus stood among them and greeted them, "Peace be with you".

He showed them his wounds and they rejoiced to see him.

Then he said to them again, "Peace be with you."

And he said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

When he had said this he breathed on them, "Receive the Holy Spirit".

He linked this sending out and gift of the Holy Spirit with the disciples granting forgiveness. "If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Lest the apostles get above themselves, or an institutionalised hierarchy in some ways their successors, it's best to be reminded that Jesus taught us to forgive not seven times but 70 times 7; to be generous to others in the hope they, and God, will in turn be generous to us. Resurrection, peace, breath, forgiveness: the Spirit given by Jesus breathes new life into us and into our world. This is the first day of a new creation.

In Acts the story is altogether bigger and louder. The disciples are indeed gathered together in one place. In what sounded like a rush of violent wind, the Holy Spirit came from heaven like tongues of flame, burning and energising those whom it touched. Its primary gift is of communication between people who spoke different languages. This is the opposite of Babel in the Book of Genesis, in which people over-reached themselves by building up into the heavens and we began to think of ourselves as gods. God scattered these people over the face of the earth and confused their languages. Without deep communication we are divided and the gift of the Holy Spirit unites us. As we discover in church week by week communion creates community.

Aged 20, and at the end of a long day travelling in which just about everything had gone wrong, I sat with a group of four friends in a Serbian orchard drinking slivovich with a farmer to whom we were complete strangers and with whom we had no shared language. His generosity in allowing us to camp in his orchard and the warmth of his welcome led to much laughter and animated conversation. Certainly it was fuelled by more than one kind of spirit, but ours was a communication deeper than words.

Recently I have read Mohsin Hamid's electrifying book, [The Reluctant Fundamentalist](#) (Penguin 2007, £7.99). It has been out for about nearly 2 years so I am a bit behind the pace and you may have read it already. It explores the personal and political consequences of 9/11 through the experiences of a young Pakistani, Changez. The novel is a 'conversation' with a silent American over an evening meal in a Café in Lahore. It opens,

"Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard. I am a lover of America ..."

As a scholarship student at Princeton, the Pakistani Changez was always an outsider, never an American. After graduation, at work in New York, with its Pakistani taxi drivers and delis, he was immediately a New Yorker. The prestigious consultancy for which he was recruited, was an aggressive meritocracy. The firm's guiding principle was to focus on the business fundamentals. If you worked hard and did well you were rewarded. If you did not, you were shown the door.

Changez loved America: it was a land of opportunity; and he loved being the best of the elite graduate recruits at Underwood Sampson's.

We were taught to recognize another person's style of thought, harness their agenda, and redirect it to achieve our desired outcome; indeed one might describe it as a form of mental judo for business. (p. 41)

This story shows how difficult it is for Americans (and Britons?) to get inside Islamic and Pakistani experience now. Changez does all the talking. An American reader might get drawn into this 'conversation' as the other party, the listener; but Pakistan is part of the Commonwealth and Changez played soccer and cricket and speaks English without an American accent. So the British reader is more likely to be able to get inside both of the people sitting at the table. Had we played that sort of role politically in the wake of 9/11 the world might look very different now.

This book is the product of global networks – education, business, culture, religion. Nationalism is transcended by the diversity of a cosmopolitan city – New York, as in London. What does it mean to be Pakistani, or American, or British? Is it possible for us to have strong cultural, religious and national identities without limiting our love for others who are different? This is much harder to achieve where terrorism has created a climate of fear. It is also much harder in an economic downturn.

The fundamentals of business include a pragmatic ability to adapt and survive. In the aftermath of 9/11, Changez defined himself in a new way which was not about power and dominance but depended on his having found the fundamentals of Islam. This is politically benign but the same cannot be said of Islamic, or any, religious fundamentalism. The spirit of religion is one of the things defining our age.

In two weeks time, at our 6.30pm Evening Service, St Martin's is being given a remarkable gift by the Roman Catholic Benedictine community of St John's in Colledgeville, Minnesota. For the Millennium they commissioned what is thought to be the first handwritten illuminated manuscript of the Bible since the invention of the printing press. This work is being led by the Queen's calligrapher, Donald Jackson, in Monmouthshire. Oddly enough, as that project nears completion, the Abbey have decided to print a very high quality limited edition and thanks to the generosity of two of our American friends they are giving us the first two of what will become a gift of seven volumes.

Looking at some of the pages this week, I was particularly struck by Ezekiel chapter 37:

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.... and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD... I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live...and you shall know that I am the LORD."

The illumination of the text on the page is of what looks like a landfill site of bones and scrap metal, including cars, despoiling the earth. The breath of God falls from above upon it. Even within the grim, grey colourlessness there are the seeds of transformation and renewal, the hint of a rainbow from below. I will leave it for you to look at, but please don't touch as these are pages we have been lent and will have to give back!

Pentecost is about the renewal and sending out of us Christians as the Church. This diverse Church bears witness about the renewal of the earth, the whole world. This is the celebration of a diverse community that communicates deeply, beyond words, in the spirit of God's energising love. There is judgement, for sure, and there is forgiveness. At Pentecost, God holds out the hope of a new heaven and a new earth which is just, and good and true. The Holy Spirit is transformative of the personal and the political and breathes into us the hope of life in all its fullness.