

St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 20 May 2018 Pentecost Sunday

Readings for the Gathering

Selected verses from Genesis 1 The Beginning In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. 3 And God said, Let there be light, and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

The Epistle Acts 2: 1-15 The Holy Spirit Comes at Pentecost

2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues[a] as the Spirit enabled them. 5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,[b] Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues! 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" 13 Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine." **Peter Addresses the Crowd** 14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15 These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! "

Contemporary reading Pentecost from Sounding the Seasons by Malcolm Guite

Today we feel the wing beneath our wings, / Today the hidden fountain flows and plays, / Today the church draws breath at last and sings, / As every flame becomes a tongue of praise. / This is the feast of Fire, Air and Water, / Poured out and breathed and kindled into Earth. / The right words come today in their right order / And every word spells freedom and release, / Today the gospel crosses every border, / All tongues are loosened by the Prince of Peace. / Today the lost are found in his translation, / Whose mother-tongue is love, in every nation.

Reflection for the Gathering

Traditionally Pentecost readings show evidence in story form of the presence of the Spirit throughout the Jewish tradition. It's a good reminder to Christians that they did not invent the Spirit along with the Trinity in the early centuries of Christian witness.

- 'In the beginning', as described by writers many centuries after the fact, the Spirit of God is described as brooding over the waters prior to the creation of the world. This supra-rational account is not intended as a summary of evolution. Nor is it a post Enlightenment style scientific explanation. It is instead a liturgical poem for use in worship. It sets out the meaning which human-beings of Jewish descent had attached to the creative act or acts bringing the world into being. Not having access to carbon dating or mass spectrometers or genetic science, they interpreted the world with the tools they had – a keen observation and an equally keen theological sense.
- Later, in the book of the prophet Ezekiel, a frequently used Pentecost reading is the prophet's vision of a valley of dry bones lying lifeless until breathed into by the Spirit.
- Then at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan the Spirit is startlingly present for those who are watching. Through the descent of a dove-like presence in this story, Jesus is affirmed as God's emissary to the world. In this moment, well before the doctrine of the Trinity was created, the traditional three personal manifestations of divinity are described as simultaneously present: God in heaven, Jesus in the water and the Spirit descending like a dove.
- As well, Jesus, you will remember, was approached one night after dark by the young religious leader Nicodemus. It is in that conversation that Jesus refers to the Spirit being like the wind, blowing where it will, unexpected and mysterious.
- Then there is the story which has been handed down of some startling events on the day of Pentecost. We heard it read today.

Pentecost is a Jewish harvest festival, held 50 days after the Passover – fifty, hence "pente". Since our Easter is linked to the Passover, then for us, the Day of Pentecost, as we call it, is about 50 days after Easter – it varies each year because Easter, being linked, as Passover was, to the lunar cycle, also

varies in date each year. The Acts 2 description of the moment sounds like someone stumbling to describe the indescribable. There are some hilarious icons (which you can easily find on the internet) drawn of this pentecostal moment where the disciples have these strange little flames on top of each head making them all look a little like an LED tealight candle! I am sure the flame-like apparition they are trying to describe was more fluid and flexible, more awe-inspiring and mystical than polite little tealights, one per head. They make other attempts to describe the experience: There was a sound as of a rushing wind, there were tongues of fire and ecstatic utterances of praise. All going on at once!

These scriptures references link the Spirit with three of the four elements Fire, Air and Water. Traditionally the fourth element is Earth. On this day of all days we grapple with the amazing idea that Spirit with a capital S and sometimes with the word Holy in front of it, *that* Spirit has arrived on this planet earth. It is as amazing as the person of Jesus I imagine must have been to people who watched him talk to and deal with the crowds who followed him. As a truly authentic being, he would have carried with him an invisible aura of authority and wisdom. This Pentecost moment for the disciples seems to be a more sudden, one-off impact of the sacredness of this idea of Jesus and his concept of a kingdom of God. Today, it is a gut punch of powerful spiritual energy.

Guite says this is the feast of Fire Air and Water. Let's look at Water first. At the beginning of the creation liturgy, the Spirit is associated with the mysterious waters of the Deep – the *tehom* in Hebrew, a pre-Creation mass of water, upon which the heavenly being, God, is about to perform the almighty creative acts of Creation. In evolutionary terms it would be the primordial soup which scientist of our time have described as containing the amino acids for living cells, activated to form proteins by thunder and lightning – perhaps this Spirit brooding over the waters had all the energy contained within it of a thunderstorm par excellence! And the other water reference is equally powerful: the numinous moment at the river of Jesus baptism. The dove-like shape is used to describe whatever brightness blinded the watchers at the river, or, it represents the understanding in hindsight that this moment, where Jesus participated in the same rituals as anyone else; **this** moment was a watershed, a blessing, a consecration to something bigger and greater than being a village carpenter.

Water has long been a symbol of transformation, a cleansing element that washes away past indiscretions and hesitations, hurts and ills, and prepares one, clean washed for a new day and a new journey. Jesus is thought to have lived with the Essene sect down by the Dead Sea for some years, and that group practised immersion rituals in baptismal pools carved from the rock. Jewish women used ceremonial bathing to end their monthly periods of withdrawal. Now the water of baptism is the spiritual entry to the Christian church – whether as an infant or an adult believer. Someone has said of water that it “*is constantly flowing, with much of its activity happening below the surface.*”¹ Water is flexible and fluid yet also deep and mysterious. It cleans and refreshes, it hydrates and assuages thirst – there are many characteristics in common between what we mean when we talk of Spirit and what we think of when we talk about Water.

Air is another element named in Malcom Guite's sonnet. Air in the form of breath appears in the prophet's vision of the valley of dry bones. This is interpreted as illustrating the lifelessness and dryness of the spiritual life of Israel. Spiritually, they have withered up and died, become desiccated and skeletal. Israel is described as saying “Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.”² As the living dream progresses, the prophet is commanded to invoke breath to come into the lifeless bodies in this powerful passage:

*Then he said to me “Prophesy to the breath. Prophesy, son of man and say to the breath, “Thus says the Lord God: come from the four winds, O breath and breathe upon these slain that they may live.” So I prophesied as . commanded . and the breath came into them and they lived and stood upon their feet, an exceeding great host*³

¹ <https://www.gaia.com/article/the-four-elements-finding-your-element>

² Ezekiel 37: 11b

³ Ezekiel 37: 9-10

Stirring stuff! As is the Spirit-wind to which Jesus refers Nicodemus. Trying to get across to this mere mortal that being born spiritually was different from being born physically, Jesus says:

⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above'⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"⁴

As someone has said: *Air is constantly in motion, even when you can't see it.*⁵ So like what we call Spirit - constant movement, constant action, frequently invisible even when most active. In Paul Young's book *The Shack*, the character he casts as the Spirit is a puzzling Asian woman called Sarayu; she constantly appears and re appears much to the confusion of Mack the main human character; as in this passage

Mack followed Sarayu as best he could out the back door... To walk behind such a being was like tracking a sunbeam. Light seemed to radiate through her and then reflect her presence in multiple places at once. Her nature was rather ethereal, full of dynamic shades and hues of colour and motion. "No wonder so many people are a little unnerved at relating to her," Mack thought "She obviously is not a being who is predictable."⁶

Which leaves fire. Someone has said: *"Of the four elements, Fire is by far the most entertaining, drawing, and dynamic. You have the power of transformation and can convert any negative situation into a positive."*⁷ We so often think of fire as something destructive that destroys our hard-won homes or places of work or forests so carefully tended. We guard and barricade and prepare against the risk of fire. But fire also brings light and warmth into our lives. Its energy can drive machinery, and facilitate processes. It is the energy which fires up the crucible where raw metal ores are refined to pure gold. It is as if water and air paved the way for this moment when fire descended at Pentecost, the day often called the birthday of the church; the church it is thought in hind sight was birthed in this moment - parented by air through water and born in fire. In this fiery moment with noise and praise and rushing wind, it came together. The seeming waste and failure of Jesus' death is put into perspective in these dramatic moments. The disciples 'get', perhaps for the first time, that this message was not contained only in the body and mind and spirit of Jesus; one single man walking this earth for an all-too-short-time. No, it was a message bigger than him and bigger than them and their anxieties. There was a power to this message which could carry them out of locked doors to face their fears, out of locked doors to include others who were quite unlike them, in this burgeoning story; it was fire and release and wind and power, water and story and numinous grace. It was quite unlike anything they had experienced before.

This is, then, as Guite puts it, the feast of Fire, Air and Water; the feast of all three being earthed in this place - not only in Jerusalem 50 days after the last Passover and the first Lord's Supper of the Common Era - but also here right now in 2018 on The Terrace, Wellington, New Zealand. And, as a result, as Guite puts it "the right words come in their right order/ And every word spells freedom and release."

I have news for you today. As a church, we do not participate in social justice because it's a 'good' thing to do, or because it is 'fair' or because we 'like' justice. We work for social justice because in ways unknown to us, the Spirit works within us, so that there is the potential for every word we speak to be of "freedom and release". Social justice is a Spirit-filled activity for Jesus-followers. It is as we are born again and again in the Spirit that we *can* be social justice advocates in this hurting world. It is as we allow ourselves to be Spirit filled, that our words can spell "freedom and release".

So may it be.

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⁴ John 3: 7-10

⁵ <https://www.gaia.com/article/the-four-elements-finding-your-element>

⁶ Wm Paul Young, *The Shack*, (Windblown Media, Newbury Park, CA., 2007), p.128

⁷ <https://www.gaia.com/article/the-four-elements-finding-your-element>