

Pentecost is Forever

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 19 May 2013,
by David Gill. Readings for the Day of Pentecost were Acts 2:1-21 and St John 14:8-17,25-27*

Today – the day of Pentecost – is the birthday of the church.

As with most births, it was an experience of joy through trauma. Imagine yourself in the position of those early Christians.

Their leader had left them. Yes, there had been those dramatic resurrection appearances, reinforcing their conviction that what Jesus had embodied was stronger than all the forces that had been pitted against him, stronger even than death. But now the appearances had stopped.

Apparently, it was all over. The curtain had been rung down on the last act. The one on whom they had staked everything was gone – ascended into heaven, some said, but certainly gone. The God they had glimpsed in him was now as far away as ever. The Word that had become flesh and dwelt among them had become, once again, silence.

They met together. They prayed. They talked over what had happened. They even elected a successor to Judas among the twelve. But still ... silence. The aching silence of the bereaved. The despairing silence of those for whom all doors to the future had been slammed shut -- locked, barred and bolted.

Then it happened. Exactly what happened, or to whom, we do not know. But we do know it had decisive significance for those early Christians and for all who were to follow after. Certainly the Acts of the Apostles dresses up the event with vivid symbolism – noises in the heavens, tongues of fire touching everyone, a crowd gathering, excitement spreading, everyone bursting into a babel of languages to talk about what God was doing, the amazed question: what does this mean? Then an excited sermon from Peter and, finally, the baptism of about 3,000 people.

The grim silence had been broken. Their desolation was ended. They had discovered that God was with them yet – making Christ known to those who had

never met him, renewing the faith of demoralized believers, empowering them to face a frightening world, binding them together in a great new family of faith that transcended all human divisions.

With that discovery, driven by this mysterious power beyond itself, the church began its long march out across the nations and down through the centuries.

We are heirs to that discovery, that life-changing empowerment. On this day of Pentecost we do not simply remember something that was, long ago. We rejoice in something that is now, and will be to the end. We celebrate the miracle that God is with *us* yet, opening our eyes to the glory of Christ, empowering us to engage with a bewildering world, renewing the faith of our demoralized churches, binding us together in the great family of Christ that transcends all our human divisions.

There are, we know, lots of special days in the Christian calendar. One or two of them, notably Christmas, touch the lives of many people not only within the Christian church but far beyond it. And that's great.

But Pentecost is specifically the festival of the church. Not of individuals. Not of denominations. Not of one local congregation or another. But of the whole church – that weird and wonderful agglomeration of people in every country on the face of the earth, speaking every language, embracing a dazzling variety of cultures and skin colours and lifestyles, organized in many different ways and worshipping according to many different traditions. A vast crowd, the centre of which is Jesus Christ its Lord, the limits of which are known to God alone, the life-giving power of which is the divine Spirit that came upon it at Pentecost.

This day reminds us whose the church is, what the church is for, and wherein lies the church's hope.

Whose it is

The church is not a comfortable club of likeminded people, but a frequently *discomforting* fellowship of the *unlikeminded*. Not a group of people pursuing their own interests, but a community drawn by God's grace into a mission that is

defined by *his* interest. Not the tame servant of any party, ideology or government, but a rebel against all parties, ideologies and governments that would stand in the way of God's life-giving purpose for the world.

How often have you heard Christians talk about the church's life, witness and worship in terms of what "I prefer" or "I would like"? Irrelevant! What matters is not what you or I would like, but what God's mission in Christ dictates – which may be a very different matter indeed!

The Pentecost-al church is not ours. It belongs solely to the Lord and takes its marching orders from him alone.

What it is for

Yes, Pentecost is a festival of the church. But not in any narrow, introverted sense. In the context of the world for which Christ lived and died – the world in which human life is built up and broken down, the world where prisoners are tortured and young people commit suicide, the world of babies crying in their hunger and old men crying in their loneliness.

The Spirit who empowers the church is one with the Father who rules the world and the Son who died for it. You and I are not here to be curators of a religious museum. We're here to be players in the cosmic drama. The One who has drawn us into the community of Christian faith insists on drawing us further, to share in his self-giving, life-giving love for all people, all creation.

Some years ago, travelling for the World Council of Churches, I attended a baptism in a remote village north of Chiangmai, in Thailand. The lay leader of the congregation told me they'd had some serious local problems. "Bad spirits," as he put it, were affecting the village well and causing strife among the people. Pray, he asked us, that the Holy Spirit may cast out the bad spirits and bring healing to the village. His request implied a statement of faith. The well? That was the realm of economics. And the village conflict? That had to do with politics. The promise of God's presence, he saw, had implications for both. It's not just a matter of what happens within the walls of a church.

Where lies its hope

Five centuries ago, when the movement for reform was sweeping the church and disturbing the status quo in Europe, the then king of France, Henry of Navarre, was a worried man. He threatened to punish the reformers if they did not fall into line with his wishes. One of John Calvin's sidekicks, Theodore de Beze, responded in words that echo even in our own day. "Sire," he said. "It belongs in truth to the church of God ... to receive blows and not to give them, but ... remember that the church is an anvil that has worn out many a hammer".

That point seems to have escaped the governments that through the centuries have hammered upon the church, seeking either its conformity or its extinction. It seems to escape the mockers and cynics, when they look forward eagerly to the disappearance of faith from the face of the earth. Perhaps it even escapes the notice of Christians, when we teeter on the brink of despair at what we ourselves have done to bring discredit to the name of Christ.

Where lies the church's hope? Not with the approval of governments or public opinion, that's for sure. Not with the likes of you and me, that's even more sure. But with the One whose we are and to whose service we are called. The One against whose saving love even the gates of hell cannot prevail. He is our hope.

Remember, it is precisely at those moments when we feel abandoned by God – that he bursts forth among us. It is precisely when the silence is deepest – that he speaks. It is precisely when the future seems closed – that he shows us the way. It is precisely when we feel most appallingly alone – that we discover he is indeed with us, to the end.

He is our hope. Pentecost is forever. And the empowering gift of God's presence is a gift that bears our names.

*