

Pentecost: 4th June 2017

Acts 2.1-21; 1 Corinthians 12.3b-13

Theresa May didn't turn up this week. All the main political party leaders took part in a televised debate on the BBC on Wednesday night except for Theresa May the Prime Minister.

She was accused of lacking "guts" and of "running away from the debate" during the 90 minute BBC TV event.

The prime minister ruled out appearing on televised debates soon after calling the election.

She said on Wednesday that she preferred "taking questions and meeting people" on the campaign trail rather than "squabbling" with other politicians.

One of the central issues of this General Election is who as a nation do we want to turn up at the crucial Brexit negotiations. What kind of leader do we want to represent Britain around the table with the other 27 countries?

There was discussion on that issue at the Hustings here on Tuesday night. Do we want someone who will be strong, determined and even obstinate and

awkward – or do we want a leader who will be conciliatory and want to work with partners in Europe to reach a good deal for everyone? Who do we want to turn up at those table talks?

Well we get to decide this week and may God guide us on where to put our cross, mindful that the cross should remind us of the way of Christ who did nothing out of self-interest but sought to serve rather than be served. There is always a temptation to vote out of self-interest. The cross reminds us to consider what is best for the whole rather than the individual.

Today is Pentecost when the Church remembers the dramatic change that happened to a group of dispirited and fearful disciples when the Holy Spirit.

When the Holy Spirit is in the room things change. The disciples had been told by Jesus as he ascended to heaven to wait until the Holy Spirit came and gave them power to be his witnesses. Those disciples huddled together in prayer for ten days praying for power from God. Praying for the Holy Spirit to turn up.

We have our plans and activities but unless the Spirit of God is at work through them they will lack power. Unless the spirit of God is at work in us we will still be pulled by our sinful nature. Our self-centeredness will win in the end.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the greatest Christian evangelist alive at the time called a special convocation. D L Moody summoned people to his hometown in Northfield Massachusetts for prayer and waiting on the Lord for a new endowment from on high. Moody who had started out his working life in the shoe business, had never received ordination but nevertheless was greatly used of God in America and Britain seeing hundreds come to Christ. He became a household name but always stayed humble. Hundreds came to his convocation. His talks were written down. This is some of what he said.

Unless God attend the word in power, vain will be the attempt in preaching it. Human eloquence or persuasiveness of speech are the mere trappings of the dead. If the living spirit be absent, then prophet may preach to the bones in the valley, but it must be the breath of heaven that will cause the slain to live...

If we want the power to quicken our friends who are dead in sin, we must look to God, and not be looking to man to do it. If we look alone to ministers, if we look alone to Christ's disciples to do this work, we shall be disappointed. If we look to the Spirit of God and expect it to come from him and him alone, then we shall honor the spirit and the spirit will do his work.

I cannot help but believe that there are many Christians who want to be more efficient in the Lord's service. It is from the Holy Spirit that we may expect this power.

When you look at the apostles that Jesus chose you can ask the question why did he choose them? Why didn't he choose select rabbis, scholars of the law, gifted orators? Instead fishermen, tax collectors, zealots, ordinary men. No executive search process. No Lord Sugar weeding out the weak apprentices. These are the last people you would choose to start a religious movement.

Of course Jesus did this on purpose. He knew it would be almost impossible for them to depend on their human ability; instead they would have to reach out to his promise of power from on high. He recognized

that all too often the more educated people become, and the brighter they are, and the better their connections to human influence, money and power ... the more they tend to look away from the power of God. They trust in God's grace less and less.

Even worse is that in that upper room, waiting for this power were men of recent spiritual failure. Those who in the moment of crisis had deserted their leader a few weeks ago. Would you want to build any kind of future on this group? I wouldn't.

Yet they waited, in prayer, together in that upper room – for power. The issue is not our ability but rather our availability to the person of the Holy Spirit. Men and women who are truly used by God are necessarily humbled, because they know the true source of their strength.

Power has a lot of negative connotations. We have seen power misused. We associate it with domination, oppressive personalities, people who want power for their own ends, their own self-aggrandizement.

Yet the simple definition of power is

1. the ability or capacity to do something or act in a particular way.

2. 2.

the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events.

For the Christian, that is about the ability to act in the way of Jesus, to be an agent of his hope and healing in the world. We need His power at work in us to be able to do that.

I read last week a couple of accounts of chaplains being part of the crowd in St Ann's Square in Manchester, where a minute's silence was being observed for those who had died in the Manchester Bombing:

Silence fell suddenly and with a strange authority of its own. Nobody whispered. Nobody moved. Men and women noiselessly wiped tears from their eyes. At the end of sixty seconds applause erupted in the huge crowd and went on and on. It seemed they were applauding the communal spirit of Manchester which had refused to give in to hatred. Applauding the victims still in hospital, many in a critical state, enduring their suffering so patiently. Applauding the families who stood vigil so faithfully at their bedsides.

When the crowd dispersed, the atmosphere around the flower shrine in St Ann's Square had shifted, and conversations turned more readily to spiritual things.

Sarah was a Manchester journalist. She came that day to pay her respects and fell into conversation with a chaplain. Her parents had taken her to church as child, but she had gone away from God. And today it was so easy to come back.

"I'd like to be at peace about all this," she said.

"Can I show you some steps?" asked the chaplain.

"I'm a millennial," was the answer. "We're just not sure there's a God."

"Would you like to be sure?"

"I just don't know if I want to make that decision," said Sarah.

"What's stopping you?"

There was a long pause.

"Nothing."

"So would you like to take that step right now?"

She prayed to know God's peace and presence.

Adam had been sitting for hours in the square, taking it all in. He was heavily tattooed, with pierced cheeks, nose and tongue, and wearing oversized earphones. One cheek was twitching as he struggled with lonely

thoughts. But when a chaplain sat next to him, he began to talk.

He was 22 – the same age as the terrorist who had destroyed so many lives on Monday night.

"I can understand how they drew him in," said Adam. "We see it in the gangs here in Manchester. They always pick on the weakest, most bullied boys. Then they give them somewhere to belong, and they can twist them any way they like."

"I used to have faith as a child," said Adam. "But I lost it. Too many bad things happened to me. I remember 9/11: I was only seven at the time. I started asking: how could a God who is in control allow this? How could he allow this to happen to Manchester? Just look at those kids – they were so innocent." Adam had grown up in a Christian school, surrounded by Bible stories and crucifixes. So the chaplain took out a crucifix from his rucksack.

"What about Jesus?" he asked. "What if God came and was not in control any more – if he suffered with us? If he went through an agony which was just as terrible as that of the kids in the bomb attack, who knew they were dying and that there was nothing they

could do about it? Wouldn't He be a God worth believing in?"

"Could I challenge you to say a prayer?" asked the chaplain. "Would you pray that if God and Jesus are real, they would reveal themselves to you?"

Adam was silent for a moment, and then in the middle of the square, with strangers sitting all around him, he prayed aloud:

"God, if you are real, reveal yourself to me. Jesus, if you are real, reveal yourself to me."

Amen.ⁱ

The invisible reality of God is all around us. The Bible tells us that God is always trying to get through to us so that each of us can have an experience of the reality of God and live a life shaped by a relationship with God. That active presence of the invisible God is what the Bible calls the Holy Spirit.

It's always a dangerous thing to set about giving hard and fast rules and prescriptions for letting the Holy Spirit empower your life. The imagery of the Spirit in the story of Pentecost is that of wind and fire. Jesus used these analogies elsewhere to describe how the

Holy Spirit may act. *The winds blows where it will* he said in John 3— you can't control it - just be open to catch it when it blows – get your sails up and wait for the wind. Where is the wind of the spirit at work? Get involved – feel the breeze!

We can't control the Spirit but we can wait and ask and be open and available for his prompting and movement. On Pentecost frail men and women were not just given help around the edges, but were filled with God the Holy Spirit. Who can deny that this is the great need in our churches today?

This is what all pastors desperately require, starting with me. We need something with the mark of heaven upon it. Too much of our religious life is made up of programs and human ideas, talents and strategies. Of course all those have value. We have natural gifts and abilities, we need to act responsibly, be good stewards and all that. We can prayerfully plan and organize guided by the Spirit. But we need something from heaven itself. Something from God the Holy Spirit that fills and floods our lives, otherwise this is all a game and pretty soon we will get resentful of religious niceties and routines.

There is nothing from heaven. Heaven hasn't turned up.

The New Testament church was often chaotic and wild. Paul's list of the Holy Spirit's gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 is in a letter where the Christians in Corinth were coping with divisions and splits because the rich didn't respect the poor, and some thought they were more spiritual and superior than others and Paul is trying to hold them all together and say you all drink from the one Spirit – you all have different gifts, thank God for them and build one another up with them.

Many churches decide that they don't want disturbing. They don't want to run the risk of becoming chaotic and wild and so ignore the gifts that God offers through the Holy Spirit. They would rather have a calm quiet life. We are all the same. We all agree. We all get on and know our place.

Let me tell you – it's very quiet in a grave. Do you want WIND and FIRE – or the still still calm of a dying, going nowhere church?

If someone offered you a gift would you say 'no thank you - bit worried about what it will do to me?' 'No thank you - bit scared of it. No thank you, I want to stay as I am'.

Your suspicions and fears are well founded. The Holy Spirit produces a climate that is anything but dull and ordinary. Fire is a compelling image of his work. Warming, exciting, glowing, energy, yet also burning and dangerous. Wind cannot be controlled.

Two persons were talking together before a large church which was being destroyed by fire. The first man spoke in a voice which could be heard above the voice of the firemen: "This is the first time I ever saw you at church." To this the second responded: "This is the first time I ever saw the church on fire."

I am not issuing a call for fanaticism. I am not issuing a call to leave your brain at home so that you can't be a thinking curious person. We don't need musicians working up the congregation into a frenzy. We don't need manipulated manifestations or counterfeit gifts. But we do need the real Holy Spirit upon us in power, in all our churches, of all denominations and traditions.

He works in all sorts of ways - quiet ways as well as dramatic ways. Spectacular ways as well as gentle almost hidden ways. Different gifts, different ways. Let no despise your experience or make you feel inadequate.

If you have decided to follow Christ, had a change of mind and heart (repent is the biblical word) and asked to receive the Holy Spirit, Christ is in you, the hope of glory. Be open to his work in your life and let us as a church keep praying and humbly asking God to pour out his Spirit on us as a church and as a community

ⁱ <https://billygraham.org.uk/p/manchester-hears-jesus-silence/>

and as a nation that there will be a turning to love and compassion for one another and for God.

The Christian life, like the life of Jesus, is a combination of waiting and activity, of prayer and service. Balance our activities for God with time spent with God in expectant prayer and worship. Don't neglect either. Ultimately we depend on the power of God.

In a world as tormented and confused as ours, we desperately need 'something from heaven'. We need God to turn up. We need God in the room.