8th June 2019

Pentecost

Acts 2.1-21

The D Day commemorations filled the news headlines this week. 75 years on it was very moving to see the survivors of that momentous day parade to the grateful thanks of liberated and free nations. Now in their mid-90s and even hundreds, there’s was a resilient and courageous generation.

My own father, who died 24 years ago, was involved in D - day plus 1 - going over as the second wave of support. Had they still been alive Ken Bloodworth and Bill Stutes former members of this church where actual D Day veterans. Ken was in the navy so didn’t actually set foot on land. Bill Stutes was in the army and actually took part in the D day landings, landing with a mainly Canadian force on Juno beach. He could mark the spot where he landed at by a timbered house. When his daughter visited the beach with Bill a few years before he died in 2009 they found that it is now commemorated as the first house to be liberated in France. Bill continued fighting across France and Belgium to Holland where he took part in the liberation of Amsterdam. On entering the city he witnessed the horrific suffering of the civilian population.

Bill rarely spoke of his war time experiences. It was a no-go area for him. I know as his minister he found Remembrance Sunday difficult. Those wartime experiences obviously made a huge impact on his life but I know they gave rise to his firm conviction that life was too short to hold grudges or grievances and that you must make the best of whatever challenges life presents.

The ending of the war gave rise to internationalism, countries co-operating together and overcoming nationalism – ‘let’s make Germany great’ said Hitler and the Nazis seduced the German people with their narrow hate filled supremacist ideology. The end of the war saw the establishment of the United Nations, the European Economic Community, indeed the world council of churches. All those things are costly and involve messy compromise. But arguably they have kept the peace for 75 years. This week has been a good week to reflect on the cost of our liberation and freedom.

When Pentecost happened 2000 years ago it was like D Day for God’s creation. Here was the liberation army, here was the power to make a difference in the world. Here is what would change people, change nations and roll back the bondage of sin, evil and death.

**The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was a sign of creation, unification, adoption, and the fulfilment of promises.**

**A new order**The story of Acts 2 portrays in dramatic form the nature of the new order ushered in by Christ. It points to realities which often do not appear so significant on the surface, which may indeed be invisible, but are even more powerful than the outward signs of wind and flame and tongues seen at Pentecost.

**Creation**First, the events of that day were the sign of a new creation. The coming of the wind and the filling of the Spirit (Acts 2.2,4) are reminiscent of the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters in Genesis 1.2, as the formless void is about to be transformed into an ordered universe. It was by his Spirit that God continued to renew life on earth (Psalm 104.30). Pentecost reminds and assures us that whatever the world may seem like, we live in a universe in which God is at work to re-create and re-order that which had become unravelled and distorted.

As we tried to be planet friendly this morning in our trip to church we act in faith and trust that God is in the business of bringing liberation for creation which as St Paul puts it is in bondage to decay.

**Unification**Second, these events were the sign of a new unification of human beings. Genesis 11.1-9 tells the story of how, following a proud attempt to achieve strength and unity through a city and a tower stretching up into the sky, Yahweh scattered the people of earth and confused their speech.

It is a striking expression of faith in the determination of God, who has made humans in his image (Genesis1.27), not to allow them to exceed that calling and so bring disaster on themselves by forgetting their creator. God's scattering and confusion of the people at Babel – like other acts recorded of him – might seem like the punishment of a petty-minded, vindictive deity. But the Old Testament does not see it like that. Isaiah 2.6-22, for example, warns fiercely of the Lord's hostility to all creaturely pride,

The eyes of the arrogant will be humbled  
    and human pride brought low;  
the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. (vs 11)

but this comes after a vision of what the exaltation of the Lord's mountain will mean: unity, justice and peace (Isaiah 2.1-5). Justice must be the path to peace – without one, you will never arrive at the other. As justice is so difficult to achieve, peace is also elusive.

In Acts 2, the curse of Babel is reversed as people of different languages find that they can hear and understand news of God's wonderful works told by ordinary Galileans (vv. 5-13). It is only a beginning, but here we see that at last the necessary process of penance and humiliation is complete, and God can begin to unite those whom he had once scattered.

The impact of Pentecost in Acts 2 was both corporate and personal. The Spirit is still having an impact but there is always a choice. The apostles were not forced out to witness to the love of Jesus. They chose to do so.

The victory of Liverpool FC in the Champion’s League unified a community; thousands of people took to the streets – they quite literally painted the town red. Is there and should there be a contrast with the way in which the gift of the Holy Spirit is celebrated? Are there ways in which the Spirit can enable us to unify our communities? Red, as a symbol of the blood of Christ, is often seen as a colour representing redemption. And, it is used in some Christian traditions to represent the Spirit. In what ways can we paint the town red?

**Adoption**Third, the events of Pentecost were a sign of adoption. The Spirit is the Spirit of God himself. He has not 'begotten' us in the manner of a physical father, but he has now come down into his creation, within and among his people, to take us into his family in a fresh way (cf. Romans 8.14-17). His status as King and Father was always implied in his very creatorship, and his establishment of the covenant partnership with human beings (Genesis 1.26,27). Now this protective relationship with us is known with a new intimacy. This intimacy had been known by some in times past, but now the Spirit is poured out on all who will receive him (Acts 2.17,18,38).

**The fulfilment of promises**Finally, Pentecost signals the fulfilment of promises. First there were the promises of a new covenant, attended by the Spirit, in various places in the Old Testament. Peter here cites the promise of Joel 2.28-32. The time of extraordinary God-events has now dawned. Peter's use of Joel's prophecy to explain the apostles' multilingual proclamation draws attention to the seeing and speaking which the Spirit enables (Acts 2.17,18). People of all kinds may now receive direct insight into the reality of God, along with the ability to speak of it.

However, people should not think that the final 'great and glorious day' of Yahweh has yet come (v.20). We are in the time leading up to it, but still more striking signs await (vv. 19, 20).

D Day was not the end of the war – that would be a year later. It was the beginning of the end. Once the Allies had got a foothold they would go on. Much historical speculation can be made as to what would have happened had the Nazis repelled the invasion – but thanks be to God they didn’t and it is not a coincidence that many of the wartime generation were strong believers in God because they saw the redemption of God played out before their eyes.

The spiritual reality is the same as the aftermath of D day. There were fierce resistance from the Nazis, battles were won and lost, setbacks were endured – it wasn’t a march of victory. If you go to other parts of the world the church is vibrant and in the ascendancy. In this country it’s the opposite – we are experiencing fierce opposition and setbacks -its not plain sailing. But God’s purposes will be fulfilled.

Second, there were the promises of Jesus himself. In an often sceptical world (**13**Some, however, made fun of them and said, ‘They have had too much wine.’ Acts 2.13) the Spirit comes to the disciples precisely as the Helper or Advocate, the one who stands alongside them to give weight to their witness and assurance to their trembling hearts (John 14.16).

He does not come automatically to 'the world', but he comes to the disciples, the ones who ask for him, the ones ready to receive the Spirit, not as some new force or even new friend, but one whom they know already, precisely because they know Jesus (John 14.17). This is the spirit of Jesus. Thus Peter, having quoted Joel concerning the Spirit, will go on to speak of Jesus (Acts 2.22-36).

***36****‘Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.’*

***37****When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’*

***38****Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.****39****The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.’*

D-Day was about seeking freedom – a freedom that we still have. Part of that freedom is freedom of choice. For example some choose to celebrate Trump; others choose not to. But it is worth remembering that whatever choice we make within our freedom, it has an impact upon others. The disciples’ choice to share the good news impacted upon the people who heard their message.

Pentecost was unique, the Church's launchpad. The Church’s D Day – the moment when the liberation campaign started. You may not think being part of the church is being part of a liberating army. You may think it’s just something nice to do on a Sunday and edge your bets just in case there is something after death – make sure you have a ticket for heaven. Well, you’ve been misled I’m afraid. That’s a religion of personal comfort and politeness – but its not biblical. Church, without doubt, is about love: loving God, your neighbour and yourself. But to do that often means a battle, a struggle with forces that stand in opposition to that love.

The *Britain’s Got Talent* final provides lots of hints as to how the Holy Spirit works. The winner was an 89-year-old Chelsea Pensioner Colin Thackray. Joy and success are not limited to the young. The Spirit works for and through people of all ages and God always has a purpose for us. The song that Colin Thackray sang was the Michael Ball hit ‘Love changes everything’, which is a powerful maxim especially when viewed in the light of the Spirit’s power. The Spirit is an expression of God’s love and, in the Pentecost event, the world was changed. A few disciples began a global movement which transformed – and continues to transform – the world. This is the real way in which love changes everything. It is also worth noting that Mr Thackray is to give some of his prize money to the Chelsea Hospital. The Spirit faces us with love and asks that we respond appropriately.

In her book, Tramp for the Lord, Corrie Ten Boom tells about an experience she had during her travels after World War II. During the War, Corrie Ten Boom was imprisoned in the Nazi prison camp at Ravensbruck – she and her sister Betsie. There in that camp her sister died in the gas ovens. After the war was over, Corrie ten boom became an evangelist. She travelled all over the world preaching the gospel, telling about God’s powerful, forgiving love. On one such occasion, she was in Germany, and after her sermon she was greeting the people who were in attendance. In the audience was a man who came forward to shake her hand. Suddenly for Corrie ten Boom there was a flash of recognition as she identified the man as one of the prison guards who had stood watch at the doors to the ovens where so many people, including her sister were killed. As he stood there with his hand outstretched to shake her hand, she said that memories of that terrible time came flooding over her – the grief, the hardship, the suffering. Here’s how she tells what happened next. ‘I fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take his hand. My blood seemed to freeze. I knew I had to forgive if I wanted to receive God’s forgiveness, still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart’. She began to pray. She knew that she could not find the power to forgive, but she could at least raise her hand. Slowly she took his hand, and when she did a rush of genuine forgiveness came over her. She said to him, ‘I forgive you, brother.’ As she tells it, ‘for a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, but I did not have the power.

How did she do that? What was the source of the power that enabled her to shake the hand and to forgive her former enemy?

The Spirit of Jesus.

On our spiritual D Day God sends his Spirit, the Spirit of new creation, of unity, of adoption and fulfilment, the Spirit of the Father and of Jesus, to be with us, to empower us in the struggle and lead us to victory.

Using material from

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<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/101-may-june-2019-c/pentecost/postscript>