

Pentecost Sunday 23 May 2010 (10.30am Geoff preaching))

Are you a party animal? Gifts and giving in the Body of Christ

Ephesians 4: 1-13

Today we celebrate Pentecost (also known as the day of First Fruits) In the Jewish calendar it comes 50 days after the feasts of Unleavened Bread – or Passover when Jesus was crucified and then three days later rose from the dead.

It flows ten days after (what we call in the Christian calendar) the feast of Ascension when Jesus returned back to where he came from. The awe struck disciples witnessed Jesus being “ taken up “ before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from sight on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives between Jerusalem and Bethany. In our church tradition we don't make a fuss of Ascension but perhaps we should as it is inextricably linked with what happens next at Pentecost.

Preaching on Pentecost often focuses on explaining what the *tongues* were about (the hearing and the speaking by unlearned disciples the praises of God to such a widespread and motley audience drawn by the noise of the storm wind) and the spectacle of “tongues of fire”. The continued power of these images still resonates in the reasons why bishops (in some churches for example) wear pointy hats (or mitres) to signal that they have been anointed “ from on high “ as in flames of fire for the office they hold and Russian Orthodox churches are built with those distinctive (flame like) onion shaped towers.

Peter's explanation focused on what was happening to the growing and astonished crowd. This wasn't an example of late night/early morning drinking - after all it was *only nine o'clock in the morning* (although in modern London that would not have been a convincing argument) but it was a celebration nonetheless. Before the fast associated with this Pentecost feast was officially meant to end at 10 o'clock God pours out the new wine.

*“In the last days “God says “I will pour out my Spirit on all people
Your sons and daughters will prophesy
Your young men will see visions
Your old men will dream dreams
Even on my servants both men and women
I will pour out my Spirit in those days “(Acts 2:17-18)*

God's Holy Spirit is given to all - irrespective of sex, age or rank. It is a completely new era and it cements the fact that although “Israel” crucified Jesus God has made “this Jesus – both Lord and Christ.” (Acts 2:36) **It is both a celebration and a coronation.**

It is also the sealing of a new covenant or agreement- promised, planned and now delivered in reality. A new Israel of God, which completely re-draws the question, asked by the disciples on the eve of the Ascension “*Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?*”(Acts 1:6) The question was too small. The gathering crowd were both a witness and a sign to God's much bigger plan and purpose that was global in extent and universal in its scope.

The passage we read in *Ephesians* helps put Pentecost in that wider setting. Paul quotes (some would argue misquotes) *Psalm 68:18*. Originally the Jews sang this song as a national song of triumph (a bit like the Red Square victory parades in Moscow) Its reality

fulfilled at Pentecost is bigger than any nation state and it is a different quality and order of victory. The Ascension is the triumph of God. It is coupled with the resurrection when death was defeated and after the cry of Jesus on the cross *“it is finished.”* The Ascension is the crowning glory of Christ’s finished work on the cross. All power and authority belongs to Christ because he has defeated every enemy, obstacle, institution, power and principality. It is His rule which has been now fully established. The *Psalm* marks the distance between Sinai and the giving of the Law and the creation of a covenant people now established in the city of peace (Jerusalem) on Mount Zion where God dwells with His covenant people.

So today marks a celebration after victory. The spoils of a war won. Most generals take from the defeated and give to their friends. Jesus takes of what is his own and gives them to those who were once his enemies. *Ephesians* earlier makes this clear.

“You who were excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”(Eph 2:12-13).

He (Jesus) is our peace. Destroying the barriers, removing walls of hostility to makes us one for (Eph 2:18) *“through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.”*

The war is won over human sin and disobedience and its consequences of death. The gifts are given out – but not just to the Jews but to the Gentiles too. The big dividing line is erased. We are all now included. So the scattering of the Jews as a result of exile and covenant failure are now gathered in – truly a celebration (Pentecost is also known as the Feast of Ingathering). Later, to underline the point of a changed reality, at the home of a man who represented Israel’s enemies, a member of an army of occupation something else happened. At the home of the centurion *Cornelius* Pentecost is repeated- exactly as *Peter* had seen it on this day – but this time on Gentiles.

Psalm 68 culminates with

*“Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth
Sing praise to the Lord ...
You are awesome, O God in your sanctuary
The God of Israel gives power and strength to his people”
(Ps 68:32,35b)*

We all now get to share in God’s victory, participants in his power and strength.

Pentecost is often likened to the birthday of the Church; we all get to join in God’s new society, in the new Israel of God. Citizens, not foreigners or tourists. God’s new redeemed community created out of the reality of Jesus victory. It’s God new bigger Israel. It’s normal to have a bit of a celebration for birthdays so hopefully everybody has a party popper (not a party pooper as I called it yesterday by mistake) and after 5,4,3,2,1, lets pop and say “ happy birthday!” in celebration of the birthday of The Church.” God’s new community”.
(Editor’s comment: pops, applause & hallelujahs!)

When I was invited to preach I was asked to speak on “gifts and giving “ and having set the scene to this I turn now in the time that is left and look at three things

What gifts are given through the Holy Spirit?

How are we to give? - As all the gifts are gifts of service?

And

Why the spirit gives such gifts and to what purpose.

After all it is a birthday and you get presents don't you?

I can't expect to cover all thirteen verses we read in *Ephesians* in detail so I have been selective in the following

What gifts are given?

Paul mentions four/five here. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor - teachers. The tendency when talking about "gifts" is to have a hierarchy of what are the most important gifts. So in some circles to be spirit filled is to have gifts of healing, prophecy and speaking in tongues. Others argue it is the threefold ministry (some say it is two fold) that is gifted and anointed overseers(bishops), elders and deacons essential for the churches health and development. Others argue that central to all such gifts is preaching and teaching and therefore the need to rightly explain the scriptures while being anointed for the task. Others point out that there are other lists, some include up to twenty gifts listed –some of them sounding a bit boring like administration and doing acts of mercy and being an encourager.

Others argue that some of the gifts were for the first generation and when the first generation of Christians died out the gifts were not needed in the same way- the job was done. Still others argue that this is a mistaken view and that we need to recover the gifts God intended in being handed out in the first place. **Amazing isn't it how presents can cause such discord?**

I would like to suggest that all the gifts are gifts of service. They may have a different function but they are given to serve. We are of the tradition which (re) discovered the teaching of the "priesthood of all believers" We all have direct access to God as followers of Jesus. We do not need a Priest to sacrifice or serve on our behalf as we are already priests and indeed Jesus is our High Priest.

They gifts are extremely varied. God seems to like variety - look at the nation list present at Pentecost. Paul writes to the charismatic *Corinthians* "*there are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving but the same Lord is served. There are different abilities to perform service, but the Son of God gives ability to everyone for their particular service.*"(1 Cor 12:4-6)

It is every member ministry, not just the spectacularly gifted few. Indeed of the five gifts mentioned in *Ephesians* they are all there to (as Paul writes) in v2 "*prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service in order to build up the body of Christ.*"

So all of you have at least one gift of the Holy Spirit if the Holy Spirit dwells in you, because you are needed by God to build the body of Christ. You can keep it to yourself, neglect it, ignore it and bury it- but it was not given to you with that in mind. It was intended to be used. That's one reason next week we are having an "audit of joy" which will be a fun way of looking at this and thinking about how God's grace may have gifted you in works of service. We all make in our own way a contribution to wider society even if it is just to keep

lawyers, policeman and social workers in gainful employment. **Yet we are also here to make a gainful contribution to God's new society and where all of these gifts can only be properly used in the context of community.**

I would encourage you to be a part of that Vision Building Day - extended church next week.

Every member ministry is what the gifts are given for – but not just that. This also links into the “how” which we will look at in a moment..

Your gift (or gifts or future gifts- because you can ask and desire these things you know) and however it is exercised (whether you are a paid professional, or given donations or unpaid and used free at the point of delivery) is **not to make you a star**. A star on top of a pyramid with a grateful public stacked below. It is not like a bus, with you as the driver, driving your passengers off to pastures new. It is to make you **a coach**. Any ministry gift is about enabling others to achieve their potential in the Body of Christ. You cannot therefore exercise it on your own – you are part of a team involved in team building.

So that leads to the “How”

How are we to use these victory gifts of grace?”

Paul writes *“do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together”*

How do you do this? Look at verse 2.

“Be always humble, gentle, patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another.”

Humility

We need humility - when others disagree with us. Firstly we need to be open to the fact that we might be wrong. Secondly we need to recognise the worth and value of other people and not use our own inbuilt sense of pride to ensure we get respect by giving into our need to win.

Gentleness

We need gentleness. The quality we need when we know others are wrong and need correction. But also see humility.

Patience

Patience – or long suffering towards aggravating people. The quality we need when others fail to respond to our attempts to guide them. But see Patience and humility.

Tolerance.

The quality we need when others sin against us and unity is seriously endangered.

If both sides of any disagreement exercised all these qualities would the unity of the church ever be threatened?

While it is true that whether we like it not the Church is One- as *there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all mankind* - we are also called to maintain and do our best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives. It's why God invented forgiveness.

But the how is also linked into the why

Why are these gifts given?

I would suggest we look at Jesus. There is an ultimate aim beyond the immediate aim. The immediate aim is as each separate part works as it should it leads to the “*whole body grows and builds itself up through love* “ (Eph 4 v15)

Yet the ultimate aim is in Eph 4 v13. “*And so we shall come together to that oneness in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God we shall become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ’s full stature.*”

It is to help us grow up - to become mature. Not just as individuals (that needs to happen) but as God’s new society, the new Israel. God’s new covenant people. The picture of the church is as a singular organism – the Body of Christ. The one new man/person. The new mature body with Christ at the Head.

Yet I would suggest that all this talk of power, victory, reigning and rule can distract us in thinking about what attaining to Christ’s full stature might actually mean. It is not about running governments but tucked away in *Philippians 2*

An attitude that mirrors Jesus

*.. Of His own free will he gave up all he had and took the nature of a servant
He became like man
And appeared in human likeness
He was humble; and walked the path of obedience
All the way to death
His death on a cross. Phil 2:6-8*

So in conclusion God gives us the gift of grace and through the gift of his Holy Spirit gives us the power to live as God’ new people in God’s new society. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are gifts of service to serve and enable the whole body of Christ.

We do this humbly, gently, patiently and with tolerance.

The original question though are - you a party animal? Or rather do you see yourself as a wall flower? Jump on in - the waters lovely.