

Pentecost- Acts 2:1-21, John 14:8-17

- I've been struck in recent times,
 - By media comments that ever growing sections of our community,
 - Are offended,
 - Even traumatised by any negative commentary at all on their lifestyle, identity or experiences.
 - This personal fragility has led to many Universities and Colleges in the United States,
 - To require 'trigger' warnings before a lecture,
 - To alert students to material or content in the class,
 - That could trigger a traumatic episode.
 - Undergirding this whole social phenomenon is a 'victim' culture,
 - That's used as a political trump card that crushes any challenging voice.
 - Adding fuel to this fire is a media that focuses on the negative, sensationalist and confrontational.
 - And while 'Fake news' is a convenient dismissal of any inconvenient observations of misbehaviour,
 - It's a perfectly natural evasion for a culture that's been soaked in the belief,
 - That there's no such thing as absolute truth,
 - And what's true for you may not be true for me.
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- Having just finished our series on Revelation and now celebrating Pentecost,
 - This got me thinking about the conditions that faced the early church,
 - And the role of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives.
 - The first audience of the book of Revelation was a church that was facing real threats,
 - Of physical, emotional and social violence.
 - And yet those threats produced a strong and resilient community,
 - In contrast to the fragile and brittle tribes that seem to mark our modern world.
 - Queen Elizabeth is too polite to be deliberately provocative,
 - But her D-Day speech reference to her wartime generation being resilient,
 - May have been a gentle dig at the 'snowflake generation' of our times,
 - That demands protection from anything unpalatable.

-What Revelation exposes however is the reality that we do live in a broken and hostile world.

-And if the warning in ch12 of a furious devil coming down to earth to war against humanity,

-Is more than just poetry,

-Then all of humanity will be the targets of his assaults,

-And no-one should be surprised or unprepared for the sufferings of this world.

-So how do we as God's people live in a hostile and confronting world?

-Why can we stand firm in the face of the challenges the devil throws at us?

-What is the source of our confidence in an increasingly uncertain world?

-The simplest answer this Pentecost Sunday is,

-Through the power of the Holy Spirit.

-In 2Corinthians 4 the apostle Paul describes our lives as being like treasure in clay pots.

-He writes;

"We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;" 2Corinthians 4:7-9

-Paul is describing a resilience that the Queen may have been alluding to when she quoted her father George VI at D-Day;

"What is demanded from us all is something more than courage and endurance; we need a revival of spirit, a new unconquerable resolve."

<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/05/uk/queen-elizabeth-d-day-speech-gbr-intl/index.html>

-Paul however knows that this 'unconquerable resolve' that King George spoke of,

-Is the extraordinary power that belongs to God and does not come from ourselves.

-With a focus on God then,

-Paul concludes in 2Corinthians 4:16 by saying;

“So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” 2Corinthians 4:16

-As God’s people,

-We should not lose heart in the face of the circumstances of this world,

-Because we’re being transformed from inside out by the power of the Holy Spirit.

-Before Jesus ascended to heaven he promised his disciples;

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8

-A bit over a week later the disciples discovered the truth of that promise.

-And just so they wouldn’t miss the significance of what was taking place,

-Listen to how Luke describes what happened from Acts 2:1-4;

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” Acts 2:1-4

-As if to underscore the power that was being transmitted through the Spirit,

-Notice Luke’s description,

-‘A sound like the rush of a violent wind,’

-‘Divided tongues, as of fire,’

-Even using that word ‘violent’ evokes incredible power,

-But for listeners steeped in the Old Testament,

-They would have thought of God telling Ezekiel to call on the wind,

-To blow into the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37.

-When he did the bones rattled,

-Sinew, flesh and skin formed around them,

-And as the wind blew onto them they stood up and became alive.

-Imagine the power that raises dead bones back to life.

- This can be nothing but the divine, life giving power of God,
- As the tongues of fire illustrate.

- Fire was often used in the Old Testament to signify the presence of God.
- Remember Moses at the burning bush?
- Or Moses leading the people to the Promised Land?
- A pillar of smoke led them by day and fire by night.
- Both of these were indicators of the presence of the Holy Spirit.
- At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry it was John the Baptist who said that Jesus,
- Would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire.
- And now at Pentecost the Holy Spirit comes in power upon the Apostles in tongues of fire,
- And they begin to speak in other languages enabled by the Holy Spirit.
- This was the power that Jesus had promised to his followers,
- And of which we also partake.

- The first ability the Holy Spirit gave the disciples was the power to speak another language.
- The significance of that is revealed by our Old Testament reading this morning from Genesis 11.
- This is the story of the building of the Tower of Babel,
- Which ended in God confusing the language of the builders so that they could no longer understand each other,
- And their scattering across the world as God had originally commanded.
- But to understand why God responded the way he did,
- You need to listen carefully to their reason for building the tower v4;
"Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." Genesis 11:4
- In our narcissistic, celebrity culture we probably don't see a problem with making a name for ourselves.

- But that was exactly the issue,
- Making a name for themselves and not obeying and relying upon God.
- The code behind building 'a tower with its top in heaven',
- Was that this was a siege tower to storm the walls of heaven.
- The name the builders wanted to make was of a people able to invade heaven,
- And defy God's command to multiply and fill the whole world.
- This tower was a statement of human autonomy and independence,
- A concrete symbol of the spread of sin from that first rebellious act of Adam and Eve,
- That plunged our world into the brokenness and suffering that marks human existence to this day.
- When God confused their languages,
- This was another curse that fell upon sinful humanity.

- But the story didn't end there,
- Because in the very next chapter of Genesis we see God calling Abraham,
- And giving him the hope filled promise that;

"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Genesis 12:2-3

- Rather than us making a name for ourselves,
- God would make Abraham's name great.
- Notice God's word 'I will make,
- 'I will bless,
- Abraham's name would be great because he'd be the father of a great nation,
- Through whom all nations on earth would be blessed.
- Can you see then how Acts 2 and the Pentecost story fit together?
- Some two and half thousand years later,
- People from all the nations created by the scattering of a unified humanity at Babel,
- Come back together in Jerusalem.

-And now the languages that symbolised the curse of separation, nationalism and ethnic rivalries,
-Are done away with.
-Everyone hears in their own language the disciples speaking about God's deeds of power.

-Amazed and perplexed the people ask one another the meaning of this strange occurrence.

-So Peter gets up and explains what's taking place.

-It's the fulfilment of all the promises of God,

-For the redemption of humanity through his Son Jesus Christ.

-Here in Jerusalem,

-At this Pentecost festival,

-The curse of Babel is reversed.

-And it's reversed for a purpose,

-So that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

-This is the ultimate power of the Holy Spirit,

-To bring life to the dried, dead bones of a sin cursed humanity.

-In Psalm 104 the Psalmist explains the power of God in creating and sustaining his world.

-And then in v30 he explains the role of the Spirit,

-v32 on our bulletin reading;

"When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth." Psalm 104:30

-It would be easy to think this is just a reference to the power of the Spirit nourishing creation,

-Renewing the earth daily through his sustaining work.

-But that power of renewal goes further than the created order,

-In Isaiah 44:2-3 the Lord says;

“Fear not O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground;” Isaiah 44:2-3

-In a drought prone nation like Australia that could be taken as a hope of rain.

-But it's actually a description of the spiritual reality of a people who continually wander away from God.

-They were the dry, thirsty ground as is made clear in the next verse;

“I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.”

Isaiah 44:3

-And this promise of Jesus in John 7 of what would happen at Pentecost;

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, ³⁸ and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” John 7:37-38

-As God's people we have the Holy Spirit within us.

-Remember that scene in Revelation 7 where God's people were marked with a seal on their foreheads?

-Paul describes that in 2Corinthians 1:21 as God putting his seal on us,

-And giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment of the future we have coming.

-Our spiritually dry, dead lives are raised to new life.

-When Jesus began his ministry he framed it in this way;

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” Luke 4: 18-19

-Notice the promises he makes from those words of the prophet Isaiah,

-In the power of the Spirit Jesus brings,

-Good news to the poor,

-Freedom for the prisoners,

-Release for the oppressed.

-It's true that once we were victims.

- We were bound in a state where we had no power,
- We were trapped in a determinism,
- Which kept us locked in bad ways of thinking, behaving and believing.
- But while we were sinners Christ died for us,
- We were released from that slavery which so many in our victim culture present as freedom.
- While once we were bound, chained, hopelessly entangled by our past,
- Our genes,
- Our status,
- Our fears,
- Through Jesus' death and resurrection and the indwelling of his Holy Spirit,
- We now have the power to change and be changed.
- We have the power to know the truth and have the truth set us free.

- Because we have the Holy Spirit within our lives,
- We can be transformed by the renewing of our minds.
- We can live by the Spirit and not gratify the desires of the flesh.
- We can bear the fruit of the Spirit,
- Love, joy, peace, patience,
- Kindness, generosity, faithfulness,
- Gentleness, and self-control.
- We need no longer live in fear,
- Of the past, the present or the future.
- Even in times of trials and struggles we can have the peace of God that passes all understanding,
- We can have the certainty of God's presence with us,
- And that he will never let us go.
- All of this comes through the power of the Holy Spirit,
- Our counsellor, comforter, advocate and renewer.