

HOW WILL YOU (RE) ACT?

PREACHER : The Revd Rob Ryan, Cathedral Curate

Sunday, May 23rd 2010

Pentecost

Acts 2 : 1-21

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

I remember a few years ago - it was actually Pentecost ...

we returned from church to find bits of white fur around the garden: the pet rabbit had been eaten by a fox. My eldest was in floods of tears and quite traumatised, my youngest was confused and wondering where the rabbit had vanished to while my daughter very matter of factly told me 'Darn fox ate the rabbit' with no show of emotion at all.

It does not end there! We were sat down to lunch when we heard this massive crash upstairs. No one seemed too bothered apart from me so I left them all eating and went to investigate. To cut a long story short, I found next doors cat trying to eat the pet gerbils. The next 10 mins saw me chasing this cat and shouting at it trying to get it out of the house. No matter which way I went it just seemed to go further up the house until it jumped out of an open window in the loft! I wondered how I, a trainee priest, was going to explain to my neighbours that I had just killed their cat!!

The cat had actually managed to cling on to the guttering, pull itself to the top of the roof, and then spent the next 5 hours lying on the ridge tiles in a traumatised state! She has not tried to get back in my house since!

Looking back the images must have been very comical,

I remember reflecting on that day then, as I do now, and in particular how different people can react to the exact same situation. Some, like Tom, fully accept what they see and allow themselves to go with the emotions. Others, like Joe, seem to be confused by events either through not wanting to accept the truth or really genuinely just not getting it! Still others, like Beth, fully accept it, fully understand the reality of it all but refuse to allow the situation to have an effect on them whatsoever!

As we consider Pentecost today I want to ask the question when faced with this opportunity and its application to our lives, 'how do we react?'

Before we can answer that I guess we need to ask the same question as the gathered people ask in verse 12 - 'what does this mean?'

Can we even answer that question? The more I study the Bible, and I think I may have said this before in this pulpit, the more I see that there is no one meaning or interpretation of scripture. This may give some of us concern but I don't believe it needs to - after all if scripture is 'the living word of God' then it follows that we will see various meanings in various parts at various times. The very fact that the same passage can speak to us in new ways as our circumstances change just adds to the beauty of this being the living word of God.

We don't really know what happened here and it is important to remember that the language is analogous. The noise was something like the wind and it looked something like flames. Luke struggles with finite language in describing a unique event from an infinite God. WE must not limit our thinking and think only in these terms, but must allow ourselves to be surprised by however God chooses to come.

I've come to liken trying to unpack scripture in a similar way to how a geologist tries to examine and understand soil. A pretty basic method is to add some soil to a bottle, add water and then shake it up for a few minutes before allowing it to settle. What you find is that the different materials that constitute the soil settle in layers.

As I take this approach with this passage there are various layers we could look at. We could look at the significance of this event happening on Pentecost which by this time in Israel's history had come to be associated with the renewal of the covenant with Noah. Rather than renew the old covenant, maybe Luke is suggesting there is a completely new deal being given to the people.

We could investigate the 50 day link. 50 days passed between the Passover and Moses being given the law on Mount Sinai. 50 days pass between Easter and Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit brings in a new law, a law written on our hearts rather than on tablets of stone.

We could analyse how Luke places the birth of the church here in a way that mirrors the birth of Christ in his gospel. First we see the birth of the saviour with the rest of the gospel telling us about that saviour. Here we see the birth of the church with the rest of Acts tells the 'church story'.

We could consider how this suggests a reversal of the confusion of Babel. There people spoke in different languages and could not understand each other. Here, people could hear the Holy Spirit speaking to them in their own language. Babel spoke of separating the people into separate camps while Pentecost suggests a universality with an openness and availability to all.

We could even contemplate how being filled with the Holy Spirit has transformed Peter from the cowardly denier in the courtyard of the High Priest, desperate to make others believe he knew nothing of Jesus, into this bold, outspoken Peter who stands up in the massive mickey taking crowd and says 'O! Hold on these people are not drunk ... this is all about Jesus!'

We could study any one of those layers and all would have something important to teach us, and I suspect we have heard some of them many times before. But the top layer that keeps floating to the top. The central meaning or the message I believe that this has for us all is that the Holy Spirit wants to fill each one of us ... today and everyday.

This pouring out of the Holy Spirit is what they have been waiting for, and not just for the last few days in that room but since the time of the prophet Joel who Luke quotes in verses 17 onwards (read)

This was written about 800 years before Jesus was born so Israel had been waiting at least 800 years for this very day!

And why?

Why does God send the Holy Spirit in this new and unique way?

Throughout the OT the Holy Spirit has been accessible only to prophets, kings and priests. But now - the Holy Spirit is available to all of us - you and me!

But why?

As Joel says - so we can prophesy, see visions and dream dreams.

Some wings of the church have hijacked this passage to push evangelism linking with the speaking about God in different languages. If we go with that interpretation alone, however, we are only taking note of the prophetic side of this three fold gift. The dreaming dreams and having visions are also important. These, I believe, are more to do with seeing things how God wants them to be, re-imagining how things could be if we allowed God to work through us and then acting upon it.

I believe God wants to fill us with the Holy Spirit so we can join with God in mission throughout the world. We need to be filled by the spirit so that God can work through us - not just with words but in actions of love, in deeds that will make a difference so that we, as Christians, really are good news to those that we spend time with.

Later in this service we will have a time of commission. During that time Neil will be whether you dare to allow the Holy Spirit to guide you. That terminology is correct - do we dare to allow the Spirit to work in us?

So I believe we have a choice today.

That choice is to choose how we can re-live this passage. How we re-Act!

Do we ignore and pretend this is not for us?

Do we acknowledge the Holy Spirit but refuse to allow ourselves to interact personally?

Do we dare to allow the Spirit to fill us and take us wherever we may go

I'd like to end with a pause and some prayer so that we can consider this Pentecost how to react.