

Sermon**Pentecost 2018**

Lessons

Ezekiel 37: 1 – 14

Acts 2: 1 – 13

St John 16: 4b - 15

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

In the footsteps of every follower since those very first days, may we be receptive to the Spirit's presence, to tones of mystical intuition, that tongues as of fire may rest once more on us. Bless our meditations. Amen.

Surrounded by death, in a valley full of bones dry and brittle, the prophet Ezekiel spoke and the Spirit of God brought new life. God, breathing upon the slain, bones rattled and before the eyes of the prophet a vast multitude appeared. Graves were opened and God said, 'I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.' In the Gospel of St Matthew, immediately after Jesus breathed his last, we are told that the earth shook, rocks were split, tombs were opened and the bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. These stories are the rich, imaginative sacred poetry of mythology: they tell us that God can bring life, new life, even from the darkest and most despairing moments of human experience. 'I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.' We are to feel these words for ourselves, in the soul. We are to stand in the valley of dry bones and at the foot of the Cross and let the breath of God breathe in us.

Scripture is a doorway into the Divine if we let the stories blossom within us.

From heaven, like the rush of a violent wind and tongues, divided as of fire, rested on those gathered together in Jerusalem. Jews from every nation under heaven were there, and all were filled with the Holy Spirit. In the Book of Genesis (chapter 2), in the second creation narrative, we read, ‘The Eternal God formed the human of the dust of the earth, and blew in its nostrils breath of life....’ In this story of creation, human beings are made from the matter of the earth, which science now confirms. ‘Carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, oxygen and phosphorous make up 90% of our bodies.

Every element found in the Earth’s crust is found in us. In Genesis, the human being is a creature formed from two ingredients: [earth and the breath of God].¹ From the very beginning, from the origin of humanity, the breath of God, the *ruach*, the Spirit of God, has been associated with birthing new life.

Today is Pentecost; a day on which we may reasonably reflect on the work of the Spirit in our time, looking to discern God’s presence

¹ Rabbi Timoner

among us and catch glimpses of the Divine in the changing patterns of life. Across Europe, attendances at public worship have been in decline since the 1950s. The average age of worshippers in churches is steadily rising. In England, the trend of decline is tempered only by its cathedrals, which show gradual growth in attendance year by year. Besides cathedrals, are there signs of the Spirit breathing new life?

Central to the changing pattern of spirituality is the practice of pilgrimage. Each year over 330 million people around the world walk their faith: some, full of faith, make their way to ancient and historic holy sites, while others step out in search of they know not what; a spiritual itch that needs scratched. Millions of Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Muslims, Jews, Daoists and Buddhists journey in search of the Sacred; they embody their spirituality. In Europe, the lowest church attendance recorded is in Scandinavia but even here there is a booming interest in pilgrimage with the development of a specialist ministry of pilgrim pastors. The more secular our society becomes the more Christians become what theologian Stanley Hauerwas calls 'resident aliens'. The question for us is, 'How do we nourish our faith in a foreign land?'

In 1935, the German Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that 'the restoration of the church will surely come from a new type of monasticism. He said, 'I think it is time to gather people together to do this'. The Scottish philosopher Alistair MacIntyre says that it was the resilience of monasteries which kept alive the intellectual and spiritual life of the church during the dark ages. Avoiding the pitfalls of the past, for some monasteries have sinister stories to tell, what might the new monastic movement look like? How do we nourish our faith in a foreign land?

At the centre of monastic life lies the rhythm of daily prayer, both private and public. In part, some of the success of the English cathedrals is their daily provision of short services of worship. The regular reading of Psalms is also being recovered and, in our troubled times, the Psalms of Lament have much to offer. Pleas of help and protection and experience of an absent God are there in the sacred hymnody. Monastic life, not least Celtic monastic life, brought daily prayer, manual labour and intellectual study together in a trinitarian discipline. Celtic daily prayer focused on the ordinariness of the every day, on the performing of mundane tasks, of family and work

relationships and, alongside that, the Church offered a ministry of benediction, of blessing, of speaking well of people, of the world: consciously cultivating a culture of following in the footsteps of the saints. As the machinery of the institutional churches becomes irreparable, we are being forced to stand on our own feet. Like the brittle, dry bones, we hear the words of the Eternal, 'I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.'

In our denomination, as in others, there is an increased use of managerial jargon by the Councils and committees of the Church but managerial jargon will not save or stir lost faith. The Church's central task is to facilitate encounter with the Sacred and to do so as a community of pilgrims, not with any narrow motive of mission. The days of mission have passed, surely; we are to witness to the One we follow. On Sunday last, as people of faith in this city, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Pagans, Hindus, Buddhists and followers of the Bahai'i tradition walked together. There was no desire to convert, simply to witness; to honour the Sacred, the Holy, in life.

Alongside daily prayer, study, a ministry of benediction and witnessing to our faith, to the Spirit that warms our hearts, where we

can we are to offer a pastoral presence, as the monasteries have done for almost two millennia. In 2017, in the aftermath of the fire which devastated Grenfell Tower, the local parish church, St Clement's, which is situated 200 yards from the Tower, opened its doors to the sulphurous night air at 3.00am while the fire still burned. Around 200 people went in: traumatised survivors and others. As the night went on, more and more churches opened their doors offering places of safety, refuge, prayer and counselling as well as basics such as food, water, clothing and nappies. The Bishop of Kensington, Graham Tomlin, said of the churches, 'our most important contribution was just being there. We were present when people were going through the most horrendous time.' In the United States, in contrast to the rhetoric against immigrants, we see the development of sanctuary churches which specifically welcome immigrants.

Doctrines which defined our past, battles lost and won, belong to another time, another place. Today, Pentecost now, is about nurturing personal spirituality, witnessing shoulder to shoulder with people of other world faiths, offering a pastoral presence where we can, and living and walking our faith. The French writer

Chateaubriand said, 'there was he never a pilgrim that did not come back to his own village with one less prejudice and one more idea.'

And, of pilgrimage, the Welsh poet R S Thomas wrote:

The point of travelling is not
To arrive but to return home
Laden with pollen you shall work up
Into honey the mind feeds on.

'I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.' Tongues, divided as of fire, rested on those gathered together. It's still happening.

Amen.