

Spirit, church, home

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 9 June, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost C

Acts: 2:1-21; Gospel: John 14:8-17, 25-27;

Contemporary Reading: from *A New Pentecost* by Michael Morwood

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ImaLTdSHWU>

Yesterday, it became evident to me that I was not the only clergy person with Pentecost sermon procrastination problems. I saw a poll on Twitter, (which was a great distraction) set up by an American Presbyterian minister. They have these little polls – and it said: “*if the apostles were not drunk at 9am, what time did they start drinking?*” The options provided were 9:15, noon, 4pm or other. I thought the best responses were 9:15 – mimosas (clearly someone not leading church today) or noon (right after the church, just like all the ministers who have a glass of wine with Sunday lunch).

Maybe drinking is not a very appropriate place to start a reflection on Pentecost...but as lectionary blogger Debie Thomas points out – “*It’s a birthday story like no other, full of wild details that challenge the imagination.*” She says, “*God showed up...and threw the world an unforgettable party.*” Perhaps there were Mimosas at 9:15!

We call this the church’s birthday. However, we have to acknowledge that the Acts account of Pentecost is a story, like so many Bible stories, that is a bearer of truth rather than a record of fact.

The Christian Church as an entity separate from Judaism did not come into existence until at least forty years after Jesus died, not fifty days after the resurrection.

Pentecost was a Jewish phenomenon. It was an experience of Jews. The Spirit did not “come down” on anyone. It was there in them already. Only a dualistic world-view could take seriously the notion that the Spirit of God dwelt in heaven and only “descended” on a group of people when the resurrected Jesus went “up” to heaven.

I think it was, instead, reflection on Jesus that allowed the Spirit to come to better expression among his friends and followers – and we know that for the first twenty years (until Paul started preaching) that this happened primarily within the Jewish religion.

Though the story of Pentecost in Acts it is not fact, it has shaped Christian imagination. We remember and retell: fire, and wind, and speech in which the Word was once again made flesh.

Marcus Borg wrote of Pentecost as the reversal of Babel, the Hebrew story in which God divided and scattered human communities by multiplying their languages. But Debie Thomas suggested that *“rather than reversing Babel, Pentecost perfected and blessed it. The Spirit didn't restore humanity to a common language; but instead declared all languages holy and equally worthy of God's stories...the coming of the Spirit wove diversity and inclusivity into the very fabric of the Church.”* As Debie Thomas says, the people of God are to be both the One and the Many.

Some of my younger women minister friends are doing all sorts of amazing, creative arty things at their churches today. There'll be streamers, balloons, red paper aeroplanes, even fire in a metal bucket of methylated spirits-soaked kitty litter (which apparently will burn for the duration of the service). One of my friends has dyed the ends of her blond hair red. I was dared to go red-headed for Pentecost but as I pointed out, my hair isn't long enough to get the flame effect, and besides my current colour did not come cheaply. (You knew that, right?)

When I was feeling relatively uncreative in the face of this conversation, it dawned on me that the drama of our service at Pitt Street service today won't come in fire or wind, streamers or balloons, but in the gathering of newcomers at the table later in the service accompanied by their pastoral friends, making their commitments to participate in the life of this church as Members or Companions.

It will come in the response that people who have been here a little longer, or a lot longer – the response that they make to the presence of newcomers – welcoming and including all who seek to belong, hearing their stories, sharing their hopes and dreams, embracing their gifts, honouring the presence of God in each one.

In the moment of welcoming newcomers, we become the Many and the One. Whether you have been part of Pitt Street for thirty years, or whether you turned up for the first time thirty minutes ago, if you choose to participate in the mission of God, the mission of reconciliation and love and forgiveness and wholeness, you are just as significant and just as remarkably made in the image of the Divine as anyone else who is present.

Together we hear the Sacred Story, and together we will grasp a renewed Pentecost.

In Michael Morwood's words: [An] *“affirmation that the Mystery we call “God” is actively present in all places, in all people, at all times.”*

The Jewish followers of Jesus, and later the early church, were called by the Spirit to honour boundless variety and creativity. Recalling that first Pentecost invites us to throw open the windows and doors of our churches, to move into the world, to cross the barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, sexuality, and even politics. Pentecost invites us to feel the Spirit as the wind at our backs, pushing us out of our comfortable places and into the broken and beautiful world, empowering us to tell the Sacred story anew.

We know that we are called to be the church in trying times. In times when the church is rightly regarded with suspicion and justifiably treated with disdain. The church in public is the church that has covered up child abuse to protect power, that denied the love of LGBTIQ people; that denies women the moral authority to make decisions about their reproductive lives. The church in public is the institution that endorses political leaders who display their faith ostentatiously at Easter and then turn away from the suffering of people seeking asylum and refugees, from people who are barely surviving on NewStart, from the voices of First Peoples, and from the wounded planet that is our only home.

But I believe that even in the face of this, the Spirit that drove those frightened followers of Jesus into the streets, is calling us to share our faith, no matter how scary that might seem.

As progressive people of faith, we are not used to speaking openly about what we believe, and so oppressive forms of faith are often the only ones that are seen and heard in the public square.

It may be tempting to think, in a time when the church is despised and ridiculed, when it is clear that we are part of an institution that has failed to be all that the Spirit has called us to be, that we should just keep our heads down and talk among ourselves.

But Pentecost tells us otherwise. Pentecost draws us back to the story of our beginnings, to Jesus and his community of friends.

Through contemplating the Jesus that they knew, the wonderful insight about the human condition dawned on them - that all human beings bring God's presence to visibility. They realized (in Morwood's words) "*that this is what life and connectedness with God and with one another is all about!*"

They realized it was their responsibility – as it is ours - to give witness to the Spirit in their lives as totally and as freely as Jesus had.

Pentecost is the wonderful good news that all people who live in love - live in God and God lives in them.

Might this Pentecost move us at Pitt Street into the streets to address the distortions of our faith in the public square: to speak about contextual, non-literal interpretations of the Bible, interpretations that focus on the love that Jesus taught and lived, rather than on the divisions that the powerful have constructed to distract us from the Divine presence in all people; to speak about what Communion is and is not, what prayer is, about what is heaven or hell, and what we believe about the Divine.

What if we were empowered to share what Jesus revealed to us, that we and all people are life forms giving expression to the Sacred! And what if Pentecost empowered us to live out in public what we know to be true about the value of human and planetary life.

I understand the cringe factor that progressive people often have about sharing faith. But I invite you to think about your reluctance differently. We do not need to claim that Christian faith is the only way to know God. I am not suggesting that our engagement in public life is for the purpose of converting others. But rather that we have received amazing gifts from our tradition - tradition that has nourished us, and we have a life-enriching experience of community when we gather here together, that it is unacceptably selfish not to share.

It is in our gathering together, in our worshipping together, in being community – these are the times when I most clearly know who I am, and why I am.

As irritated as I get with the institutional church, as appalled as I am by the division proclaimed in Jesus' name, I cannot imagine being without the home of a progressive faith community. Such as this one.

We know from reliable social research that there are just as many people in our society who are open to religious practice and involvement, but who have not found a place where they feel truly welcomed, where their stories may be heard, with love and respect; roughly the same number of people who attend church in Australia at present.

If Pentecost is about the birth of the church, it is about the creation and nourishment of a spiritual home, where everyone who seeks is recognised, welcomed and included.

As well as being public, prophetic, progressive Christians, we can also strive to ensure that our congregation is a place where all who come know themselves to be at home: with God, with themselves and with the community of justice-seeking, compassion-sharing friends who gather here with them.

On this Pentecost Day let us give thanks for the church.

The church where stories are heard.

The church where stories are told.

Where stores of life matter deeply.

And let us give thanks for this church and the knowledge

that in the Divine Presence

we are all part of one another

and we are all here at home.

Reference: Debie Thomas, "The One and the Many," <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay> . Posted 2 June 2019.