

Pentecost 2018 St Mark's

Yesterday, Lady Jane Fellowes, sister of the late Diana, Princess of Wales read at the wedding of her nephew, Prince Harry, from King Solomon's Song of Songs:

Set me as a seal upon your heart, a seal upon your arm, love is as strong as death, passion as strong as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

Bishop Michael Curry, presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, our sister Church in the USA, then preached a rousing sermon which drew on a range of references including Dr Martin Luther King, Teilhard de Chardin and a noted African American Spiritual:

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; if you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, then tell the love of Jesus, who died to save us all. O, that's the balm in Gilead.

It was sensational. All you will get from me, I fear, is pastiche of that sort of style of preaching.

The reference from Teilhard was particularly striking. The French Jesuit had reflected on the discovery of fire and the extent to which it established civilisation. Bishop Curry reminded his billion-strong audience of Teilhard de Chardin's challenge for the world, namely to harness the power of love, which would be the second time it would have harnessed the power of fire, to transform the world for ever.

Fire is at the heart of the celebrations of Pentecost. We have the Paschal candle burning for the fifty days between Easter and this Feast. As we light the Paschal Candle at Easter, the deacon sings of it as "a flame divided by undimmed". A strange comment about a symbol of unity. But this is a quote from Psalm 29 v 7 "the voice of the Lord *divideth* the flames."

As we heard in the New Testament reading from Acts, the flames, or tongues of fire which swirled into the house where the Apostles were, were "cloven", *divided*, as they rested on the gathered company's heads.

Pentecost, coming 50 days after Passover is a Jewish feast. At Passover the Jews celebrate the freedom of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt; and 50 days later they commemorate the giving of the Law, in the wilderness, when Moses climbed up Mt Horeb/Sinai. And what accompanied that ascent? Thunder and lightning. Just as the gift of the Law was announced by these dramatic signs, so in the house in Jerusalem on the Pentecost after Jesus's death, there is a mighty sound, and divided tongues – thunder and lightning once again.

Divided light, lightening, speaks of this primordial *division*; it takes us back to the very early texts of the Old Testament.

In Genesis 10, just after the flood, we are told of the descendants of Noah. Noah's son Eber gave birth to Peleg – a name in Hebrew which means *division*. St Luke's genealogy of Jesus, in the New Testament, uniquely, will trace Jesus's ancestry back to Adam through Peleg – *division*. In the generation of Peleg what takes place but the events of Genesis 11, the building of the Tower of Babel, when the one nation of the world constructs a Tower, so

high, that God shatters the arrogance of humanity and scatters it to the ends of the earth. One nation is *divided*, and can no longer understand the tongues of others.

At the first Christian Pentecost, the divided flames do not sanctify human *division*, but they mirror it and in so doing transform it.

Then something very interesting happens. At the end of Acts chapter 2, the early Church, then does all it can to live out the Christian Gospel. Its members sell all they have and hold their goods in common and distribute them, the Greek word is one we keep meeting, they *divide* them. Human *division* moves from being the *division* of peoples to equal *division* of what is shared - a new human unified harmony. The early Church live the Christian ideal for just one moment. The Spirit has been poured out and proved that it cannot, does not divide but brings unity, for those that are able to live it.

At just that moment, the streets of Jerusalem are thronging with all the nations under heaven for the great feast of Pentecost. All that was *divided* centuries before, is awaiting a unity it has never known since, and the Spirit is poured out and they each hear the disciples speaking in their own languages.

St Luke is the author of the Book of Acts, the second volume of his great narrative of salvation. In the first, in his Gospel, Luke recounts Jesus's baptism. After Jesus has been anointed with the Holy Spirit in the Jordan, Luke gives us Jesus's genealogy, which takes his heritage back to Adam, the first man. To get there we are taken to the generation of Peleg (*Division*), the son Eber, the son of Noah. It is as if Jesus's own ancestry (which includes *Division*) is reconciled, united, resolved.

In the second volume Luke tells of the anointing of the Church with the Holy Spirit, at Pentecost. The Spirit is outpoured and as Christ is empowered to proclaim the good news at the start of his ministry, so in turn his Church is similarly anointed at its inception at Pentecost. In turn too, the list of *divided* nations is given, the nations which through the power of the Spirit are united by a common tongue once again. *Divided* nations are reconciled, united, resolved.

Old Solomon (as Bishop Michael Curry called him yesterday!) and Old David have much to say to the Duke and Duchess of Sussex and us all:

“Set me as a seal upon your heart, a seal upon your arm, love is as strong as death, passion as strong as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.” “A flame divided but undimmed.”

William Gulliford
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