**Emmanuel and St Columba’s United Reformed Churches**

**Cambridge**

**Sunday 20th May 2018**

**Pentecost**

**Sermon**

*Acts 2.1-4a; Galatians 6.7-10; John 15.26-27, and 16.4b-15*

I am not good with IT. I need help. Help from those who have better knowledge than I do. That’s why I am always happier when Jess, our twenty something daughter, is home.

Nor am I any good with cars. I need help. Help from those who have better knowledge than I do. That’s why whenever we move to a new town, even before I visit the congregations, I want to cultivate good relations with a local motor mechanic.

I wonder how you feel about your knowledge of God? Maybe lots of us feel about God as I do about IT and cars, and indeed God. We need help, especially if our fragile hold on religious knowledge is going to stand any chance of evolving into faith. We need help from those who have better knowledge than we do. There are, of course, theologians who can help us. But they are not God. Like us, they need help from one who has a better knowledge than they do. Indeed, even Martin Luther used to say, ‘I believe I cannot believe’. He meant that by his own effort or will he could not approach God, let alone achieve faith in Jesus Christ as his Lord.

Maybe that is what matters about this Feast of Pentecost, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. In our reading from the Fourth Gospel we are introduced to the idea of the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete, or Advocate. (15.26f) - ‘one who provides information about a person or event concerning which the speaker has direct knowledge.’ Seen that way, and this was Luther’s point, the Spirit, coming from the heart of the Godhead, is our helper with faith and with spiritual understanding. In Luther’s words, *‘I believe I cannot believe … but* *the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith. in the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.’* What a fabulous thought; in our longing for God, and for faith in God, there is help at hand.

A little later in this morning’s Gospel, we are offered another clue as to the Spirit’s role or purpose. She is described as our ‘guide’. (16.13) The compound word translated as ‘guide’ is derived from the Greek for ‘road’, or ‘way’, and from the verb ‘to lead’. So as our guide, the Spirit might be helpfully regarded as one who ‘leads us in the way’. Now, something to lead me into and along the Christian way is welcome indeed. I can so often feel at a loss, far from ‘the way’, in a spiritual quandary. Where can I turn for help? But if Pentecost is about the coming of that one who *leads me* into the way, then I am inclined to see this as the most immediately relevant and vital of all the Christian festivals. “Hail thee, festival day!” This is the day in the liturgical year that makes a difference today. Little wonder the Bible’s accounts of the Spirit’s coming are suggestive of rushing winds that blow away the cobwebs of religious ignorance, or of fires that are the source of life and love, as the preacher at yesterday’s wedding had it. This Spirit is about bringing our faith to life, to flame, to flower here and now.

As she leads us in the Christian way, maybe the Fourth Gospel is right to suggest that Spirit’s greatest gift is to nourish in us truth. Truth seems to be a tricky concept today. Objective truth is eschewed. There is *your* truth that *I* must respect, and *my* truth that *you* must respect, but we are profoundly cautious about there being any abiding truth that is true for all of us all the time. Yet isn’t that what the Gospel offers us - the tantalising thought that the Pentecost Spirit can reveal to us basic and essential truth to which we can cling through all life’s changing scenes? John 16 suggests a fundamental truth about us as human beings: that we were lost in sin, strangers to righteousness and subject to judgement (16.9-11) but that we are redeemed, rescued by the wondrously unmerited grace of God.

We also learn from the Fourth Gospel the truth that God has an essentially positive attitude to the world: God loves it, God doesn’t condemn it, and God gave that only begotten Son to save it. (3.16f) Now, if that *is* a truth which the Spirit of Pentecost seeks to reveal to us, what is the concomitant truth which it suggests to us about *our* attitude to the world, about our mission in the world? As I read it, it’s what feels like an irresistible vocation to love the world, not to condemn it and, as the Body of that same Christ, to give ourselves sacrificially to it. That’s what Christian aid does, and is that not Downing Place Church’s exhilarating mission, too?

If it is, frankly, I find it challenges me to the core. But remember this: Luther helps us see we can’t believe without the Spirit, but that we don’t have to try to because Pentecost is our celebration of the *gift* of the Spirit. Surely, then, by extension, even though serving God’s mission can all too easily seem beyond us, it isn’t, because of the Pentecost Spirit. It gifts to us everything we need to be God’s people effectively and fruitfully for our generation - wisdom for tackling the conundrums of modern life and love for countering its volatility.

Pentecost used to be a big deal. It even warranted the Whitsun Bank Holiday. But no more. It has been secularised out of existence, so that the two May Bank Holidays can be at the extreme ends of the month. Let *us* not be fooled, though. Pentecost matters supremely. This is the day when the Spirit came, that we might be brought to faith in Christ, and enabled for serving him, until the world might believe it is loved by God. How wisely, how urgently, how fervently we should pray, ‘Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire, and lighten with celestial fire’. Let it be so, as we take the words which first the choir sang, and now make them our own prayer.

Amen

N. P. Uden

20th May 2018