

Sermon on Acts 2: 1-21

Jesus, Yes... Church, Well, I'm Not that Religious

If the Ascension emphasises Jesus' absence, the going away of Jesus' physical presence on earth, Pentecost, the 2nd act as it were, underlines the re-entry of God.

God breaks back in, in a rush of wind and fire in order to make Jesus present again in the Spirit.

Jesus had promised always to be with his disciples, and even in his going away, he keeps his word in the coming of the Spirit.

The Trinitarian dynamic, present throughout all Scripture is evident again here as Jesus returns to the Father which in turn releases the Spirit.

Pentecost was the time of the harvest, the great gathering in of the crops and God is enacting his own harvest, a harvest of people for himself, a harvest called the church which would be Jesus' cloud of witnesses in the world.

At Pentecost God constitutes a new people, a people filled, led, and shaped by the Spirit of Jesus descending on us, and disrupting us to be ushered into the way of self giving love.

The way of our Saviour.

But being the church is a complicated business.

The world, as it always has, looks with a certain suspicion on this strange people called Christians.

And particularly in our age of sophistication and technological advance, I often get a sense of, 'are there still people going on with this stuff'.

Like, haven't we all moved past that superstitious nonsense?

This manifests itself in different ways, but often bubbles to the surface in casual conversation and acquaintance, I find.

Most of us have been on the other side of that popular rhetorical marker of being a person of faith.

Being described as 'religious'.

‘Oh, I didn’t know you were religious.’, an old school friend said to me once on finding out I was a minister.

It’s like they can’t relate to you once... the terrible truth is out there.

‘One of those people.’

There’s a kind of rhetorical deficit, like they can’t find a language to talk to someone so remote and different – the mysterious religious!

I feel like saying, I am still human you know.

Recently, I took part in the local ANZAC Day service and one of the ceremony leaders described the ministers as ‘the religious people’.

Kind of ironic given the pageantry and pomp that goes along with these events these days.

I smiled pleasantly, going for a look of mild amusement (my standard response).

It’s the benign smile which masks the feeling of frustration burbling up inside at this well worn cliché.

Fairly regularly in conversation I’m confronted with this same ascription.

Except usually it’s related in the negative from the other side.

I meet with people from beyond the church and they say something like, ‘Oh, I’m not that religious.’, the implication being that obviously I am.

It’s kind of a warning and a affirmation at the same time.

On one hand they’re saying, ‘it’s good that you go to church, I can see there’s value in that for you, and you church people do good things time to time.’, on the other hand they’re saying, ‘don’t imagine for a minute that I’m going to become... well... religious like you.’

And so we enter this familiar dance of text and subtext.

And I come to wonder what people from beyond think goes on in church. I think we’re pretty normal, most of the time?!

Aren’t we?

I remember a class I had at college where the lecturer asked, 'Is it possible to say Jesus, yes, church, no.'

The answer of the world at our present moment is certainly yes.

Jesus, yes, for sure.

Church, oh well actually I'm not that religious.

Jesus is seen alongside other world religious leaders like Gandhi or Mohammed, and mostly people like his particular brand, at least what they think they know of it.

He was a good guy, they say, a good person, who taught good things.

Christian values they say, I want my children to be brought up with Christian values.

A few years ago I married a couple at their lovely rural property.

It was a wonderful affair on a beautiful May afternoon and they were lovely people.

About 18 months later they rang me looking to have their new born baby baptised.

I was very happy to take the phone call.

'We'd love to have Jimmy baptised.'

'That's wonderful', I said, 'When can we schedule a service here at the church so we can welcome your family to our community?'

'Oh, well actually, we'd like to have it at the farm again. You know, just family.'

At this point I gently let them know that baptism always takes place in the midst of the baptised community (except for rare exceptions) and that we'd love to welcome them to our church whenever it would be convenient.

I didn't hear from them again.

Jesus, yes. Yes, of course we believe.

Church, no, we're not that religious.

It has come to be assumed that faith need not include the church.

And when I say the church, I mean a regularly gathering, praying, serving community of Christ in whatever form.

I can do faith by myself.

It's perhaps the most pervasive misconstrual of our age.

It is fed into the faith of the church by a surrounding culture which tells us we can have everything on our own terms.

We can be consumers of religion along with everything else.

The privatisation and individualisation of faith.

'Faith is a private matter between you and your Priest.', Rick Lischer says in summarising the spirit of the present time.

So being religious, so described in the eyes of the world, means taking all this stuff a little too seriously.

With slightly too much commitment.

If you actually commit to a community of faith, to being in relationship with others, regular worship, prayer, service and witness, that means you're religious.

And that means you're strange. Odd.

There's something mysterious about a people who would be like that when you can happily have faith at home at your own convenience.

In your own time.

Without the hassle of, well, others.

Which of the philosophers was it that said, 'Hell, is other people?'

It's the spiritual equivalent of the McMansion, with just as many walls pushed out the extremities of the block.

Plenty of space for me inside, plenty of protection from those outside.

And so the whole 'religious', 'not religious' becomes a way of differentiating and labeling.

I'm not that religious, I believe on my own and that's plenty for me.

Today is Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The birthday of the church.

Perhaps it would be better to say the recapitulation of the Spirit as it had been present way back at creation hovering over the waters.

But after Jesus had ascended, cleared the way, as it were, the Spirit came and made Jesus' presence available to all right across the globe.

From the very beginning, the nature of the faith, the nature of the body of Christ on earth, following Jesus' departure was set at Pentecost.

As the Spirit moved on the people, so the church's very fabric was sewn.

They were all together in once place, and they were filled, and they spoke, and people heard them in their own language and understood.

The tower of Babel was reversed as the Spirit brought the people together in one heart and one voice, yet each hearing in their own language.

And the fire of the Gospel started to burn as Peter began to preach.

And the movement of which we are still a part here today burst out into the world, like the releasing of a compressed spring.

At Pentecost God begins a new kind of community.

A religious community to be sure, but where religiosity begins with the inspiration and illumination of the HS.

Where it begins in God's power from beyond us.

Our religiosity begins and is forever shaped on someone else's terms.

On God's terms.

We don't create the church, it is created in us by the Spirit shaping us into Jesus' people.

We are caught up in it as our hearts are awakened to respond to what God has done, is doing, and will do through Christ.

The church begins by us coming to see the world and ourselves and others in a new way.

Where our vision is recast to see the imprint of Jesus on every human being, friend, family, even enemy, and where we're called to respond with grace and love.

The church assumes the highest doctrine of humanity one could imagine.

Slaves and kings are of equal worth in the sight of God.

And the church is to enact this truth in its common life day by day.

In every way, the new people, the new community born at Pentecost, embodies a different way to the presuppositions of the world.

The Spirit binds us into Christ so that whether we are separated by distance, or place, or time, or age, or culture, we are yet together in faith as we gather in his name to pray and worship.

We are in communion, as part of the same body, organically bound together.

The mystic sweet communion as the old hymn puts it.

It can never be, Jesus yes, church no, for as Rowan Williams puts it, 'Being where Jesus is means being in the company of the people whose company Jesus seeks and keeps.'

Christianity is an 'accompanying' faith.

The Spirit of Jesus accompanies us on the way, and we accompany each other and the world, present to one another, forged together in God's own love in Christ.

And delighting in the wonders of the world, and lamenting at the brokenness of the world, which become ever more concentrated to us in our perception through faith.

Pentecost religiosity is this new sight and the new community that comes along with it.

The new community that sees everything through this lens.

We are painfully aware that we have not lived up to the aspirations, indeed the theological imperative of the church, but we don't give up.

We keep on being together and inviting others to come and see Jesus in faith... in the hope they too might catch the fire of the Spirit God has sent which draws people together rather than splits them apart.

We need another Pentecost wrote William Booth the founder of the Salvation Army, send the fire!

The fire of love and mercy, of community and friendship, of salvation and renewal.

We're not atomised individuals.

We're all dependent on each other and on God. I need you and you need me.

We need each other and we need God.

And if acknowledging this through faith, and living out what that means in the community of the church is what it means to be religious, to be seen as religious, well then I'm more than happy to own the label.

Jesus yes, therefore church yes.

This is the day when the Spirit came, we shall rejoice and be glad in it.

And from the moment of our first breath to our dying hour, God accompanies us so that we might accompany each other.

When we take this way together, as Peter and the early disciples did, as the church has done through history, amazing things can happen... for us, for others...

Pentecost is God's great 'yes' to the world.

And it's in his Spirit that this message of hope is carried by his people the church, the body of Christ.

We are here today standing in this way, worshipping in this way.

And in this way are called from now until eternity.

In Jesus' name, and by the Spirit's power.

Amen.