

Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 19th May 2024, Pentecost

Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14
Acts 2:1-21

Psalm 104:26-36
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

In Saint Paul's Anglican Church, Roma, there is a wonderful stained-glass window which depicts the Holy Spirit appearing above the heads of the apostles on the day of Pentecost. The colours in the window are vibrant and the expressions on the faces of the apostles are filled with wonder. As a piece of art, the window is stunning, and the artist has been faithful to the reading from Acts that we heard today, *'Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.'* (Acts 2:3).

As Australians, this talk of the Holy Spirit being like fire may make us anxious because we know the destructive power that bush fires have and how quickly fire can consume trees, crops, grass, wildlife, livestock, sheds, cars, homes, and people. Yet we also know, particularly as we head into winter, the gift that a contained fire can be. We have a slow combustion fire at our place in Toowoomba and it heats the whole house in a way that reverse cycle air-conditioning does not! There also seems to be some psychological comfort that comes with such a fire because we better relax in front of it and tell stories.

The reading from Acts tells us that there not just tongues of fire, but there was also a sound like a rushing wind. Again, the sound of rushing wind can be an unsettling thought for us in Australia because cyclonic wind can cause branches and trees to fall, and roofing iron to be violently relocated. But, I think this sound of rushing wind can remind us of a verse right at the beginning of the Book of Genesis. This verse tells us that, *'In the beginning when God creates the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.'* (Genesis 1:1-2). A creative, life-giving, 'wind from God.'

However, there was not just the sound of wind, or the appearance of fire on that day, the Book of Acts tells us that the apostles were empowered to speak in different languages about their belief in Christ. Their belief that Jesus had lived, and died, and risen... and that through him all people could find loving relationship with God in this life and the next. Indeed, if we kept reading chapter two we'd find Peter spoke so convincingly, about three thousand people made the decision to get baptised that day (Acts 2:41).

I wonder if Peter would have the same impact if he was preaching here next week?

Two thousand years after that event I wonder how we understand the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. As I look around, I can see no one with tongues of fire floating above

their head but that doesn't mean the Holy Spirit is not at work in your life and mine. As a bishop I sometimes wear a mitre which is supposed to look like a tongue of fire, but again the Holy Spirit is at work in all of our lives not just the lives of those who are bishops. When I was travelling in Central and South America earlier this year, I would have loved the ability to speak Spanish fluently but I stumbled regularly and caused many to laugh. Experiences that were good for my humility, but not for my self-esteem!

How do we understand the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, in the life of the Church, and in the life of the world?

Sitting with that question this week I have been drawn to four words. This is a high risk strategy because Anglicans are often conditioned to think in threes! You know, the homily that has three points seems to be easier to remember than the sermon with four or five... but, here we go – something special for Pentecost!

I think the Holy Spirit is that energy from God who creates, sustains, inspires, and empowers. With that belief the Holy Spirit is the one who makes each breath we take possible, and indeed each heartbeat that sustains our life. Further, that the Holy Spirit **sustains** us through times of plenty and through times of need.

Further, that the Holy Spirit **inspires** us to do creative things like cooking and gardening; writing and playing an instrument! Inspires us to recognise God's guidance when we read the Bible, and when we pay attention to what is going on within and around us. Inspires us to care and to use our little God given lives, abilities, and resources... to make a difference for good. Inspires us to have hope even when things feel overwhelming, and when there appears to be no way forward.

Further, that the Holy Spirit **empowers** each of us with different gifts that will be a blessing to the life of our congregation, our community, and the life of the world.

The great Australian hymn writer, Elizabeth Smith, has a wonderful prayer to the Holy Spirit in the concluding verse of 'God gives us a future...' In this we can sing and pray, '*Holy Spirit, teach us how to read the signs, how to meet the challenge of our troubled time. Love us into action, stir us into prayer, till we choose God's life, and find our future there.*' I think it is a good prayer for us as individuals and for us as a Church.

In many places throughout the world a simpler prayer is offered in Latin, 'Veni Sancte Spiritus' which literally means, 'Come, Holy Spirit!' Come Holy Spirit – meet us in Word and Sacrament; meet us in prayer and song; meet us when we are with others and when we are alone; meet us... and, in your grace sustain us, inspire us, and empower us that we can be the women and men you call us to be.

As I close in prayer, I invite you to join me each day this week in praying, 'Veni Sancte Spiritus'; 'Come, Holy Spirit!'

Gracious God, we give thanks for the gift of your Spirit in our lives; the renewal of your Spirit in the life of the Church; and the work of your Spirit in every aspect of creation. As we pray, 'Come, Holy Spirit!' we ask that you blow out any cobwebs of complacency, and renew within us a way of being in the world that makes your love known. We pray in the name of the one who said, "I am with you always..." Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.