

"Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Acts 1:21)

God's grace as we step into another season of the year – winter. For some, winter is a place of cold and separation. Everyone stays indoors. Here, in Queensland, we do not confront the cold that many others do at this time of year. We have not seen many trees lose their leaves. We have not seen the frosts, and hail, and snow. We do not see the earth seem to sleep, as it does in many other places. And yet we know the effects of winter, and know that this is a season of change.

For many the changing of a season is welcomed because the season past has perhaps been a difficult one. For some the changing of the season is unwelcomed because the current season is one of exhilaration. Whatever feelings accompany the changing of our seasons, one thing is certain, seasons will undoubtedly change. How then are we to navigate the changes? There are seasons in our lives too. And we often have difficulties in understanding why they are there. Why do we have to pass through winters with barren branches and frozen ground, times without flowers and fruit, without singing and joy? Why? What 'changes' in 'life' have affected you? Where is your pain? Where is your joy? Where is your sense of hope and peace and purpose and love?

Today we celebrate 'Pentecost'. As you know, 'Pentecost' was originally a Harvest Festival for Jewish people. At the Passover the crop's first sheaf of barley was offered to God; and at Pentecost two loaves were offered in gratitude for the ingathered harvest. It had one other unique characteristic. The law laid it down that on that day no servant work should be done (Leviticus 23:21; Numbers 28:26). So it was a holiday for all and the crowds on the streets would be greater than ever. (Can you imagine a great crowd, possibly up to 180,000 people?) Of course, over time Pentecost also became a Festival celebrating the giving of God's Law at Mt. Sinai. And so for us, Pentecost is where the gospel of Christ begins to bear fruit (as Jesus promised). In Jesus the Messiah has come, the Messianic prophecies are fulfilled and the New Age has dawned. The early Church had a tremendous sense that Jesus was the hinge of all history; that with his coming, eternity had invaded time; and that, therefore, life and the world could never be the same again. And so, the disciples were 'changed'.

But before continuing, there is one myth that we must dispense with. We should note that while the disciples were waiting for what was to come, they were by no means a frightened, dispirited group. They may have met behind locked doors for a time (it is not spiritual to be foolhardy), but once they had become convinced that Jesus really had risen from the dead, they were filled with great joy and confidence, and were continually in the Temple openly praising and blessing God (Luke 24:52-53). They "continued with one accord in prayer and supplication" (Acts 1:14) and even went so far as to make the number of Apostles up to twelve again ready for what was to come (Acts 1:15-26), and this was after they had been endowed with special wisdom in the Upper Room (John 20:22). Their 'inactivity' was thus a sign of obedient expectation and not of fear. It is misleading to suggest otherwise.

But the central importance of Pentecost is the Spirit's transformation of the church into a community of prophets (note that in Acts 2:18 "they shall prophesy" is found neither in the Hebrew text or the Septuagint of Joel 2:29, and appears to be Luke's addition). The community that had gathered in Jesus' name is now made something that they were not before: prophets of God's word, messengers of the good news of Jesus. That transforming Spirit is given to all of them, apparently not just the eleven plus Matthias, but the larger community of 120 which was described in Acts 1:15.

English translations also underplay the fear-inducing, adrenalin-pumping, wind-tossed, fire-singed, smoke-filled turmoil of that experience. Those who observed this Pentecost visitation from outside the room are described in the NRSV as "bewildered" (v. 6), "amazed and astonished" (v. 7), and "amazed and perplexed" (v. 12). The Greek terms describing their reactions could be appropriately rendered (following the lead of various lexicons) as confused, in an uproar, beside themselves, undone, blown away, thoroughly disoriented, completely uncomprehending. This is an incredible day in human history. Can you image this day in your mind?

At the first Christian Pentecost, God breathed His Spirit and changed the followers of Jesus. They were new creatures. God's Spirit dwelled within them. And with their words proclaiming God's mighty acts, Jesus' followers breathed out God's Spirit on others. And God's People were gathered together.

We need the same power from on high if we to "call on the name of the Lord to be saved" (Acts 2:21). We need the same presence of the Holy Spirit among us and in us. We need the same infilling of our hearts that will so fill us with the love for God and each other that there will be no more room for pettiness, for selfishness, for ambition to sin.

Today we celebrate the work of the Spirit of God in our lives. Properly speaking, Pentecost is not the birth of the church. God has had faithful followers and believers before this time. But Pentecost is the re-birth of the church, where the Holy Spirit of God enabled the disciples of Jesus to go out with the good news of Jesus for the positive help and changing of people's lives.

But today, we are living in a different context, in a new culture. Today is a new ball game, and that there are huge numbers and percentages of people around us that do not believe in Christ or belong to any church. Unfortunately, many of us mainline Christians e.g. Lutheran, Presbyterian, Catholic, Methodist, Anglicans, and Baptist do not have the skills, habits and attitudes to talk with unchurched people about Christ. In some ways, it is not really our fault; it is our heritage, our roots, and the consequence of growing up in a culture that we thought was Christian. It is sometimes difficult to share the message of Jesus, isn't it? Have you ever felt this way?

In this context, many people make the statement, "I'm not going to tell my children what they must believe. I'll wait until they are older so they can decide for themselves." People might not actually say this, but they may demonstrate this by their lack of involvement in any sort of faith community.

In response, all I ask is that if people use one of line logic in one area then they must also be willing to apply it in other areas. For example: "I'm not going to tell my children what clothes they must wear. I'll wait until they are older so they can tell me what to wear." Or, "I'm not going to tell my children what they must learn. I'll wait until they are older so they can tell me when they want to go to school." Or, "I'm not going to tell my children what to eat. I'll wait until they are older so they can tell me what they want. And if they want pizza, chocolate, or any other thing, that's OK. I'm not going to force food they don't want down their throats."

Can we have a 'take it or leave it' approach to religion? Many people would say 'Yes'. And it is true that you cannot 'force' faith down a person's heart. But this is what Peter said on the day of Pentecost, "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Elsewhere he said, "Salvation is found in no one else (that is, Jesus), for there is no other. This is a really grand statement, isn't it? Do you believe this? Are you ready to share this message, being led by God's Spirit?

Scripture tells us that we must always be ready to tell others the good news. We must be prepared as Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:2, "Preach the word. Be ready to do it whether it is convenient or inconvenient. Correct, confront, and encourage with patience and instruction". Peter tells us in 1 Peter 3:15,16, "When anyone asks you to speak of your hope, be ready ... Yet do it with respectful humility".

Henri Nouwen, from "Time Enough to Minister," in Leadership, gives us an excellent example of being and remaining in a state of preparedness. Nouwen had gone to a monastery for solitude and prayer, but while there was asked to give a series of lectures to some students. His answer was, "Why should I spend all my sabbatical time preparing all those lectures?" The answer from the abbot came, "Prepare? You have been a Christian for 40 years, and a few high school students want to have a retreat. Why do you have to prepare? All those years of prayers, worship, scripture reading, and communion with God should have given you enough material for 10 retreats." Nouwen continues, "The question, you see, is not to prepare but to live in a state of ongoing preparedness so that, when someone is drowning in the world comes into your world, you are ready to reach out and help."

The Apostle Peter said, "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." What does it mean to be 'saved'? At one level the work of the wider church in promoting education, welfare, caring and health services, and so many other things indicates one level of salvation. But there is another level as well. For some people 'salvation' means 'freedom from the ignorance of religion'. But that's my prayer as well... that people would be free from ignorance of Jesus and to actually know Him as their God and Saviour.

At Pentecost story God tells us what it means to be the Church. In the Gospels we see the corn of wheat falling into the ground and dying: in the Acts we see it bringing forth much fruit (Jn.12:24). In the Gospels we see Christ purchasing the Church with His own blood: here we see the Church rising into a new existence. And with the Holy Spirit richly poured out on the first Apostles, Peter loudly proclaims (to those who would mock him), "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

God desires change in all His children. In 2 Peter 3:18, Peter challenges the believers, "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To Him be glory both now and for ever. Amen." The word "knowledge" does not simply mean to know about Jesus, but it implies having a deep, intimate relationship with Him. This takes action on our part to get to know Him better through His Word. God is in the process of bringing us into something new, something greater than anything we could imagine or create because God does "...far more abundantly than all that we ask or think..." (Ephesians 3:20). Isaiah 43:19 says, "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."

God always has a "next step" in our walk with Him. He called Abraham to a faith journey and brought him out of Ur and into the Land of Promise. Although the promise was given to Abraham and his family, they "died in faith" without seeing the fulfillment. They could have resisted that change, decided it was too hard and gone back, but they didn't. Hebrews 11:15-16 says, "If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one..." When we yield to His call He will change us "from faith to faith" (Romans 1:17), "from glory to glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18), and "from strength to strength" (Psalm 84:7).

Sometimes in order to come into a new season and spring forward in faith, we have to let go of the old season. Isaiah 43:18 says, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past." One of the many lessons life teaches us is to let go. We can't hang on to past hurts, past struggles, and past relationships. And, sometimes this means we have to give ourselves time to grieve in order to move forward. We may have to let ourselves feel the loss, be sad for a little while, and talk to someone who cares. After we've grieved, we can pick ourselves up and start looking ahead once again. God has given us true new life in Jesus, and we rejoice in this 'new life' through the work of the Holy Spirit in and among us, in all our joys and our sorrows.

There are so many things that we don't know right now. There are so many questions where we no answers. There are so many ways in which we may grieve, and so many ways in which we wonder how we're going to survive. There are so many reasons to be worried, heartsick, afraid. But, while there are so many things that we don't know, here's something that we do know. We know that the same Spirit who was poured out on the church at Pentecost is still active in the world and in our church and in our lives, breathing the gift of life from Jesus within us. What a glorious gift this is!

Today we celebrate a new beginning, a fresh start. Today we celebrate the Spirit, who moves and creates out of nothing. Today we celebrate the Spirit, the breath of God who can raise dead, dry bones and give them life and breath. Today we celebrate the Spirit who transforms communities and who brings life out of death. Today we celebrate that the Holy Spirit can bring to our church, to our world, to our nation transforming grace and healing fire. We are the people called to live with the vision of the kingdom of God. Our focus is to be on Jesus through the work of the Spirit of God within. And the Spirit makes this possible. Thanks be to God. Amen.