

Pentecost Sermon 2020

Over the past 8 weeks people have on several occasions told me that God is punishing us with plague, drought and locusts. I have responded only with polite interest because that isn't my reading of the situation, but I wouldn't want falsely to claim prophetic insight. Although the Old Testament Israelites attributed murderous wrath to God, our knowledge of God is through a relationship of love and sacrifice - God's sacrifice. We relate to a God who said "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink."

However, a week or two back I had an experience which I think Old Testament Theologians **would** have interpreted prophetically. It started with a clatter of gravel down the chimney into the grate of our sitting room. I blamed it on recent rain. But then I heard fluttering. I don't like the desperate scrabbling of trapped birds so I pulled down the blinds, opened just one window, and retreated out of the room. Through a chink in the door, I saw the tip of a feathered tail appear in the grate. A big bird had fallen down our chimney. The tail disappeared as the bird intelligently turned itself round so it was beak first and then a wood pigeon shot out into the grate, flew straight up, crashed into the ceiling & then ricocheted off the wall. In the end it left through the window.

We were left with a few downy feathers on the carpet, the memory of its noiseless fury, and power, the marks of its head and wings imprinted on the walls & scratch marks of its beak in the plaster of the ceiling.

In the same way, the energy of the first Pentecost ricocheted through the early days of Christianity. After the first glorious descent of the Holy Spirit, Peter, filled with the power and energy of the Spirit preached the sermon of his life: Thousand were baptised and the tens of thousands of visitors those Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene - they would all return home, telling of Peter's words. Stephen would become a deacon and die a martyr, Philip ended up travelling South on the wilderness road to convert an Ethiopian Eunuch; Thomas went to India, Peter to Rome. Wherever they went they made believers. And the energy of the Holy Spirit has gone on silently reverberating through the church ever since.

Each of us received the Holy spirit at our baptism, and it never leaves us. Sometimes the voice of the Holy Spirit is an insistent calling in our heart which influences our life choices, relationships, careers. Sometimes she may seem to fall still & we seem to be on our own but that's just an illusion. We are never forsaken. If we fail to listen to the Spirit we can forget how to hear her, but if we turn our attention to the Spirit we will become attuned again.

This knowledge is not limited to Anglicans. The Jewish senior rabbi Jonathon Wittenberg writing in the Time this week said, 'The elders taught that all the biblical Commandments were transmitted to the people by Moses, except for two: "I am the Lord" and "Have no other gods before Me". These each person heard directly from

God. because, some things only our own heart's experience can tell us, just as we can't fall in love by proxy.' The experience of the Spirit is personal and it's a relationship with God for each one of us. That insight is a recognition from a perhaps unexpected source, that the Holy Spirit speaks silently into all our lives.

Sometimes, like our wood pigeon turning herself round, the Holy Spirit leads us to completely change the direction of our lives, to turn things upside down. Over the centuries, the church in England, led by the Holy Spirit, has changed its mind on the authority of the pope; the morality of slavery; and in my life time, the validity of the priestly ministry of women. Listening to the Spirit takes time - and we may not immediately see our way.

. In the past 9 weeks the church has chosen to align itself with the government's policy of social distancing and staying at home to the extent of closing our churches. That is a more drastic response even than happened at the height of the plague in the 17th century. Our churches are and must remain the beating hearts of our communities, places of prayer and worship to witness to the power and love of God. Our buildings are closed but the energy and loving fury of the Holy Spirit can't be contained, can't be stopped.

Even though we may not, at present, worship together in church, your prayerful worship at home is a way of inviting the Holy Spirit with her silent power and loving fury into your homes. May you also find the prints of the Spirit in your homes