

Celebration LINK

June 2004

Pentecost then and now

Is modern experience the same thing as the original?

Pentecost is a favourite season for many Christians, a heart-warming time that holds out the promise of new life, a time rich in the symbolism of fire giving energy or rain bringing water to dry and thirsty ground. Whatever the reality, it represents a hope for all those jaded by the effects of modern life on the Christian soul.

Those who seek 'pentecostal' experience are not short of advice. There is plenty of theology and practical experience to draw on. But is the modern experience quite the same thing as the incident we read about in the second chapter of Acts? One of the problems of being a Christian in the 21st century is that we tend to read the Bible with the lens of our own time and experience. We have largely lost touch with its origins, and we read it almost as if it had arrived from God without background or context.

All of us do this, of course. It is inevitable, and up to a point there is no harm in it. At times when God seems to be doing something new, it is especially important to be able to relate that to the source documents of our faith. In community, for example, living common life highlighted certain Biblical truths, rather like viewing an object under infrared light, which in turn expanded our understanding of faith. But unless we also recognise the Biblical context, we can lose something too. We can lose sight of what the pioneers of Christianity actually believed.

Pentecost may well be one such example. What is sometimes called 'pneumatic' experience (an unfortunate expression, if technically accurate!) is a very well known phenomenon. It certainly looks as if that was what was happening on the day that we read about in Acts, and the attempt to understand modern experience in the light of it is legitimate. But it is also clear that, as with many other Biblical narratives, there is also an historical context, which shapes its meaning.

The Acts of the Apostles is really Luke's Gospel volume 2, and just as there is more to the stories in the Gospels than immediately meets the eye, so there is in the case of the story of the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. In the Gospels, what may appear to be a more or less straightforward historical account is usually loaded with theological significance of one sort or another – a key phrase, perhaps, or a link with an important event in past religious history, or a living representation of some truth.

The Gospel writers seem to have been particularly fond of this approach, which (as history in the church has shown) had a more enduring value in communicating the eternal significance of Jesus' life than a modern biography would have done. Acts is a kind of transition from that approach to a more conventional narrative. But Pentecost, like the Ascension story, still belongs in the previous mode. These are events that have special theological significance.

One obvious feature of the Pentecost story is that it is unlike the phenomenon of glossolalia recorded elsewhere in the New Testament or experienced today. People who hear glossolalia do not, as a rule, understand what is being said. The incident at Pentecost, if it involved a form of glossolalia, was of a different order altogether and had a unique and special significance.

One aspect of that seems to have been a link with the Tower of Babel. The story of the Tower of Babel has a special importance in religious history. Ostensibly, it explains the existence of many different languages, which in turn are a powerful symbol (and cause) of the disunity of the human race. On a deeper level, the origins of such disunity are seen to be in the providence of God, who perceives the destructive nature of a unity that is created apart from God and opposed to God.

Thus Babel, like Adam, is a symbol of the 'old man'. Just as Jesus is the new Adam, so Pentecost represents a reversal of the Tower of Babel. Instead of tongues being the source of confusion and disunity, they now convey the voice of God to all, regardless of language or nationality. Pentecost is the emergence of the post-Jesus 'new man'.

We should not underestimate the importance of this concept. Even allowing for differences of time and social circumstances, it has both a religious and a political

Ministries of presence



A newly acquired building, formerly in use by the Salvation Army

On whichever side of the Atlantic it may be, the Community of Celebration always feels the weight of its past history. In earlier years, a worldwide ministry to the church, particularly in music and worship, strongly determined what members did with their time, and even, to a degree, who actually *were* members.

Today, the focus is much more on seeking to be the presence of Christ where we are. One new development this year has been the acquisition of a building recently vacated by the Salvation Army (above), which will greatly extend the premises available for local activity.

The site is convenient, being next door to the existing Community office. It thus rounds off the block where all the Community houses and office are situated.

One of the uses planned for the building is women's ministry, for example courses in basic skills. There is undoubtedly a need in the area, and a start has already been made, but there is a great deal of work to be done before the new premises are fully usable. James von Minden, whose job was to oversee the chapel building project, wryly remarked that he had been hoping to get back to normal maintenance this year!

As reported in previous issues, Celebration is in partnership with the Church Army in the shape of John and Alison Stanley, and supports their work. Under John's leadership, after a tremendous amount of work which included scrounging materials from many sources, the community centre project is coming to fruition (below). It is hoped the once derelict building will be ready to open in July.

Of course, the ongoing Celebration ministries, such as small conferences, do still continue. The new premises associated with the chapel make a big difference here. Once, conferences had to be held elsewhere. Now, they are also part of the ministry of presence.



The local community centre project, a Church Army initiative. Capt. John Stanley seated on scaffolding

What of the Celebration house in the UK? Here too we have had to adjust to a very different situation from that which existed a few years ago.

As 'members on detached service', initially it seemed natural to assume our role was that of promotional agents for Celebration, maybe even seeking to recruit new members. When God seemed to be saying otherwise, it was necessary to dig deep to rediscover the roots of our vocation.

We are reminded of Paul's remark about the Corinthians - first they gave themselves to God, then to Paul by the will of God. We generally take a pretty down to earth view of calling, since God gets far too much of the blame for decisions which are basically our own. But at root, true vocation always involves an openness to be or to do whatever God puts in our way.

So it is in this case. Our calling, like that of the Community itself, is simply to be a presence where we are. That can (and does) involve parish ministry. A parish church keeps our feet on the ground. It is a place where theology is proved and prayer is tested, sometimes to the limit. We have certainly found that to be the case, though it can also be richly rewarding.



Council for UK ministry:
Back row: May McKeown,
Margaret Bradshaw,
Front row: Bill Farra, Phil
Bradshaw

But our vocation is not defined by ministry or tasks, however seemingly important. It springs from our life of prayer and commitment to God. Here, what seems important is to respond to what is in one's heart. It does not mean treading a preordained path.

All these kinds of reflections were the subject of a meeting which took place at Aliquippa in April, a gathering of the newly formed Community council for ministry in the UK.

The council is a practical body, and many other matters were discussed: the future development of newsletters, publicity for the Community's summer schedule, development of publications, the CCCT website, a review of the current parish ministry, vision or policy for outreach ministry, connections with diocesan or other groups, networking and stimulation in theology, practical issues concerning mailing lists.

One new venture this year is the publication of the Community's Rule of Life. To make it more accessible to the public, a commentary has been written by Phil Bradshaw, and it is now available in booklet form. We are producing it in house as we test response.

All of this is the background to our vocation rather than the substance of it. The vision for the future lies more in discovering what 'presence' means to us today, in our circumstances.

From that point of view we are at a useful turning point. In September, Margaret Bradshaw leaves her job with the NHS, thus creating a situation in which, for the first time in a number of years, she and Phil will be in a position to pursue a ministry together on a daily basis.

Margaret's work has already drawn her into involvement in various aspects of child protection, and she would like to build on that. Whether that is the way forward remains to be seen, but it is a subject of much prayer at present. But whatever we decide, for us it will still be the 'presence' of Celebration in this country.

Finally, we must mention Susan Abbott, who continues at the nursing home in Reigate. She is unable to correspond now, but visits, cards or letters will certainly be much appreciated.



Remodelling inside the former Salvation Army building

Community events at Aliquippa

June 11-18 Annual Conference

June 23-27 Vocations Conference

July 14-18 Evangelism Workshop

August 4-7 Music Workshop

September 4-6 Labor Day
House Party

Plus, year round:

Individual and group retreats
Sabbaticals
Youth Group Pilgrimages
Volunteer Service Programme

Details available on request



Flowers in the chapel, Easter 2004

New publication

The Rule of Life of the Community of Celebration

with commentary from
Phil Bradshaw

Price: £3.00 +50p p&p
Send cheque to

Community of Celebration
Christian Trust,
35 Cavendish Road, Redhill,
Surrey RH1 4AL.

Please allow up to two weeks for delivery

dimension, which we see being worked out in Acts in relation to Jews and Gentiles. We tend to think of the 'empowering from on high' exclusively in terms of personal spiritual effectiveness, but from this perspective it is more like the power to create an inclusive form of humanity. Its scope is universal, as was that of the Tower of Babel.

In modern times, we have seen a hint of this in the charismatic movement of the mid twentieth century. At that time it appeared that religious differences (surely the most intractable of all) were being transcended in the new movement of the Spirit. But it did not take many years before that began to fade. The movement fragmented and became stuck in its various theological ghettos. This is why it is important not to simply read one's own presuppositions straight off the pages of the Bible.

In our community life and history, openness to the Spirit meant openness to God in the other. That had the advantage of preserving something of what seems to have been the core meaning of Pentecost - something more than just a religious experience - but it does not mean that we got it right where everyone else didn't! We all need to be renewed continuously in the Spirit of Pentecost, which affects every aspect of life: religious, spiritual, social and political.

The current divisions in the church, and its inability (especially in Europe) to bridge the gap between faith and non-faith, are evidence of the absence of Pentecost among us today. It is not simply an absence of religious enthusiasm – indeed, there is plenty of that around. It is something more fundamental: a

profound understanding that the reversal of the Tower of Babel produces a new, inclusive humanity, not just more people in church.

Are there any other aspects of Pentecost hidden below the surface of the story? We might take a look at just one. Pentecost is the old Jewish Feast of Weeks, held 50 days after the Passover. It was the day when the first fruits of the grain harvest were presented, but in later times it was also the day on which the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai was celebrated.

The Law, of course, was another feature that, to the infant Jewish church, came to symbolise the old humanity. So it was on this day, the day when the giving of the Law was celebrated, that the new law was given, the law of the Spirit. This is the law that is no longer contained in written codes, but is written on the hearts of men and women.

Working out the relationship of the Law and the Spirit is a central preoccupation of the New Testament, even in the Gospels. It is often a very difficult relationship. The Spirit fulfils the Law, yet also opposes it when it prevents people from gaining access to God. And nowhere is this conflict more sharply exposed than in religion.

The very nature of religion is that it involves allegiance to God, who is seen as the supreme authority and lawgiver. God is to be treated with reverence and awe, and obeyed to the letter, while religious authority is there to pronounce God's laws and blow the whistle at every infraction. There is very little 'wiggle room'. One does not argue or negotiate with God. God's laws are not for questioning or challenge.

It is easy to see the results of this in a religious state, or in a situation of religious bigotry, but it also applies where there is religious freedom. Where people are free to believe whatever they want, they frequently adopt their own laws, codes and beliefs, which they share with one another in their own enclave. Those who do not conform are often condemned, or at best regarded as suspect. Boundaries are there to be kept.

This is the nature of things, with religion. Even 'the Spirit' has to be reduced to something predictable, something that conforms to an expected pattern, something approved as in accordance with God's will or ways. It's not always clear whether this comes from our own need to control or God's supposed need to be defended. But in either case, the real Pentecost Spirit seems to be missing.

That Spirit caused Peter to cross the most sacred of boundaries to embrace what God was doing amongst Gentiles. But there are not many Peters around today in the church. If they do exist, they are probably ignored or even denounced as people who are disobeying God's word or undermining the faith.

The real Pentecost story captures our imagination, because we can see how it got the attention of people in society at large. A new, inclusive humanity, schooled in the ways of God but not controlled by laws or seeking to impose them on others, is a very attractive prospect. It's a humanity that can only exist if driven by the very energy of God himself. That's the Pentecost we really need to pray for.

Phil Bradshaw