

## Sermon Archive 296

Sunday 31 May, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: John 20: 19-23

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Pentecost - the festival of God giving the Holy Spirit to the believers, turning them into the church. Most frequently mentioned on this day is that big, bustling gathering of all nations in a public place in Jerusalem. There's the great, rushing wind, and the strange appearance of flame upon the people's heads, and the speaking in many languages - a huge holy hubbub. The church bursts into the world like a fanfare, a whirling dervish of "look at this!" It's bold; it's noisy. It's kind of global. And indeed, that's how Luke tells the story - the birth of that body that would spread its life to the ends of the earth. That's what the coming of the Spirit looks like and what it does.

Tucked away, in another gospel, though, in John's gospel, is another story of the giving of the Spirit - a quieter story - one you might even almost call the "lockdown version".

-ooOoo-

Indeed, locked down, in their rented room, are some disciples. They've locked themselves in there because the world's become unfriendly and just they need a bit of distance, a bit of space. The one-time people of Jesus, the not-yet people of the Spirit, just need a bit of quiet. And then it is (no one's quite sure how), Jesus is there with them, wishing them peace. "Peace be with you", he says. And there's something in the being greeted, that shifts these people from the hurt, nearer to something that feels like a gentle joy. However it's happening, it's turning their spirits. Then, without wind and flame, without the shouting out of the nations, silent as a simple breath, he breathes on them, and says "receive the Holy Spirit". He speaks to them about how now they're to forgive sins, and how now they're to go out into the world. With forgiveness for the world that frightened and hurt them, they're to go out into the public

places, to re-join the world as forgivers of the world's sins. That's the quieter birth story of the "church", the gently Spirited people of God.

I imagine that you can see where I'm going with this. We, as people of faith, are about to re-emerge into the world. We've been, at different levels, and by various degrees, locked away. But now we've been given permission to gather again. So, soon the doors will open, and the people will come in - and we'll go out - and our fear and the public space soon will mingle.

You know, some of us are going to run into this head first - as if blown along by a great wind - we can hardly get there soon enough. We'll have to be careful with that flame on our heads, so we don't burn down the house. And we'll find one language won't be enough for us, because we've got so much to say - like we've been bottled up for far too long - God! Let us meet and speak!

Others, though, will come a wee bit more slowly - not because we're unhappy to come again - but because we've found the time at home has ministered to us like a breath in an upstairs room. We're not sure about this two months way of God's speaking - but there's a poignancy there - a sense that God has been present to us in the different pace that we've taken. (What have we learned? What do we want to hold for a bit longer? What do we need to retain? Time to sift it all, and weigh it in the balance of the spirit.) And of course, even others of us will come back slowly, because we're still just a wee bit nervous about our health, and being around others.

I think our time apart from one another has changed us - not just us at Knox, but the whole lot of us. From many quarters of the community, I've heard people talking about Covid as a teacher - teaching us how important our friends and families are to us - how we really need one another. Teaching us that we *can* live without our cars, and that maybe shopping isn't an everyday necessity. It's taught us that skies can be cleaner and neighbourhoods quieter. It's taught us which of our leaders are up to it, and which are happier playing golf. The locked doors time has been an opportunity to re-set. We go back into re-engagement with the world as a "taught" people, people who come now to things differently.

What I like about the quieter story of Pentecost is that the people **do** start from a place of timidity; and that Jesus seems to understand that. But, in his own gentle way, he doesn't allow the timidity to be an excuse for not going forward. Now **is** the time for re-engagement; the people need to go forward into life. But they're going back into life as a different people. They went into lockdown as confused, defeated people, somewhat overwhelmed by their past performance and the challenges of the unfriendly world. They re-emerge, now they've been in conversation with the forgiving, peace-giving Christ, as people who have a new task: that task being to forgive the world.

Perhaps one of the most significant recent movements of forgiveness, that we've witnessed, was the Truth and Reconciliation movement in South Africa after the apartheid era. To this movement, Nelson Mandela brought the understanding that forgiveness was the only way forward. He said, "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies." He said "Forgiveness liberates the soul, it removes fear. That's why it's such a powerful weapon."

His brother in the cause, Bishop Desmond Tutu, made the point that in order for forgiveness to occur, to have a real effect in the world, it needed to sit on the foundation of truth. Truth as a necessity for reconciliation - that which needs forgiving needing to be described accurately and honestly, with responsibility being taken. Only then, once honesty and truthy have come to the surface, could deeds of forgiveness be made. Name what went wrong. Take responsibility for what went wrong. Then embrace, through some act of graciousness on the part of another, the coming of some new community, of reconciled relationship, of forgiveness.

If it's our role, in this post-lockdown re-engagement with the world, as people of the Spirit, to conduct a ministry of forgiveness, what's that going to mean? If we have learned anything in lockdown, if lockdown has changed us, and if we're called from that change, into the ministry of the forgiveness of sins, what's to be done?

Well; if we have learned that we belong to one another, that all people are one, then the sin to be forgiven now is all that used to divide us. The prejudice and bigotry; the racism and homophobia; the religious intolerance. In breath-like gentleness, we will name those things - will own our own complicity in them, challenge them when we see them - and help reconciliation to come to the world.

If we have learned, during lockdown, that you can work hard at work, and do a good job, and suddenly, for no fault of your own, become unemployed, and need assistance - then we're going to call out the sin of bashing the beneficiary. We'll call out assumptions that poor people are lazy or weak. We'll ask that rich man who said he was really smart because he'd never paid taxes, whether it is smart, or whether generosity isn't really a smarter way - so that hospitals can have facemasks and sanitiser next time round. We'll work, within all of that, to dismantle the sin of greed.

If we have learned that we have sinned against the planet, polluting its water and sky - we will seek, in our new ministry, to say "sorry" through practical deeds of ecological kindness - "be kind", we said, "be kind" we learned.

At Pentecost, Jesus gives the Spirit to the people, that they might overcome their fear, re-engage with the world, bringing the forgiveness of sins. In John's version there's no preaching, no flame, wind or fulfilment of ancient prophecy. It's so much quieter than that. But in the forgiveness of sins, this new ministry is creating a world renewed. People, upon whom the gentle breath has come, are called into renewing the world.

I think that's enough for now. Soon some of us will be together again, and our engagement with the post-lockdown world will begin. Thanks be to God for the giving of the Spirit. And before we start, let's keep together a moment of quiet.