

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
PENTECOST
SUNDAY 24 MAY 2015
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
John 20: 19-23; Psalm 104; Acts 2: 1-4

“A New Creation”

Pentecost....

That one time a year when Christians let their hair down.

Scanning Pinterest and Facebook this week for interesting things to do at Pentecost, there was a plethora of wild and wonderful things suggested that could help Churches celebrate this festival. Some of them as innocent as encouraging people to wear red, or pray the Lord's prayer in a couple of different languages, and as daring as bringing balloons to Church, blowing bubbles, lighting sparklers or even having strawberries and cream for breakfast.



And of course we will be doing our bit this Sunday as well. A bubble machine, red balloons, red clothes everywhere and a special morning tea. Ready to be rocked and rolled by the Spirit!

Are you?

In my experience, most Pentecosts I've celebrated so far, in spite of balloons and bubbles, dressing up in red, and generating some sense of expectant excitement, we mostly seem to be heading home afterwards with a vague sense of relief that nothing more earth shattering or seriously challenging has happened than the bubbles, the balloons and the dressing in red. That we've celebrated Pentecost, let our hair down just a little bit, and that everything has stayed under control. That we can continue as we are, like last year, and the year before, until Pentecost comes around again next year.

I may be wrong. Perhaps, unlike me, you have all come to Church this morning hoping, longing, hankering for a dose of Spirit that will get you babbling and burning just like those disciples two thousand years ago. Perhaps you really would like to be amazed as it says in Acts, like the disciples were, perplexed, bewildered, in uproar, undone, drunk, no longer contained, and out of control, dancing down the aisles with your tie undone and your shoes off.

Yes? Or maybe not?

The strong words in Greek that are used to describe what happens that first Pentecost are played down in the English translation. The emotionality tends to unsettle us, and so we dampen it down a bit.

Dancing and babbling, with flames coming out of our ears, amazed, perplexed, bewildered, in uproar, undone, drunk and out of control. Being taken over by the Spirit to such an extent is not what we do, or what we would like to see done on a Sunday morning. Not even at Pentecost.

It doesn't fit in with our Christianity. The way we do faith simply isn't like that. It doesn't, generally, make us burn and babble. It doesn't, usually, leave us amazed, perplexed, bewildered, in uproar, undone, seemingly drunk or unhinged. Nor would we want it to.

Our image of a true Christian life is one of temperance, of control, and containment of emotion with no unnecessary exuberance, of solid, dour, unperturbed and unperturbable faith that isn't easily moved or shaken. Pentecost is not our style, and although we try, once a year, to let our hair down a little bit, most of us, deep down, don't trust the excessive, over the top emotion the story tells us about.

And yet, at the same time, alongside the confident feeling that there is nothing wrong with the way we do faith, mixed in with our proud reticence and reserve around too much emotional display, some of us may also feel a twinge of insecurity, a vague feeling of guilt even, or disappointment and wonder.

What would it be like to be so carried away? Could our reticence be a sign of a lukewarm faith? A sign of a lack of commitment and involvement, a lack of surrender? If we were really open to the Spirit, if we really opened our hearts and minds, and were like those disciples back then, wouldn't we, like them, have people flocking to our Church, 3,000 on a Sunday, all agog and wanting to hear more?

At this point, I think it might help to give you some background about that first Pentecost.

It was the Jewish festival of shavot when this outpouring of the Spirit took place. A harvest festival that celebrated the abundance of God's gifts, both material and spiritual.

In a largely agricultural society, this was an important festival. People lived from harvest to harvest, with a deep sense of gratitude and relief when the harvest was good. It truly was a reason to let your hair down, eat, drink and be merry. A bad harvest meant starvation for many, a good harvest meant at least a couple of months with less to worry about for everyone.

Jewish people, alongside and mixed in with the celebration around harvest time, not only celebrated the material, but also the spiritual gifts, the spiritual harvest of faith. They told the story of the giving of the law at Mount Sinai at this time; the law that made it possible for not only their fields, but their whole lives to be fruitful.

The book of Ruth was read, a harvest romance with a twist, embracing the stranger in their midst, and acknowledging that the abundance of God's grace and love was not only for Jews, but extended beyond the boundaries of their people, their nation, and the limits of their ethnicity, to others through whom, and in whom, God's abundant gifts could be given to the world.

The story of the Tower of Babel also featured in the celebrations, reiterating that division and barriers between people was not what God had first intended. That these were rifts, gaps and realities to be healed, where God's love and care would truly bear fruit.

In other words, when the disciples got up on that Pentecost morning two thousand years ago, they were ready to eat, drink and be merry, and let their hair down. To celebrate the abundance of God's goodness, both materially and spiritually, with plenty of food and drink, telling each other stories about the law being given in wind and fire on Mount Sinai, about barriers coming down, about a moabite woman who gets under a blanket with a Jewish man to become the great-grandmother of one of their greatest kings, about a time when everybody spoke the same language and the whole world was one.

And they must have been looking forward to the celebrations after everything they'd been through. They would have welcomed the opportunity to party, and be part of something they'd known since they were children. Some normality, something they knew, something to lift them up and out of the fear and gloom from huddling up inside this upper room in Jerusalem since Easter.

Sure, they had experienced the living Christ after Easter, but, from what we can gather, they were still grieving, still lost, still insecure about what it all meant, and insecure about where they were going from here.

Then, suddenly, the familiar celebration they were about to enter into, comes alive. Elements of what was already there suddenly come together and take on a new life.

What the story tells us is that a group of Jesus' disciples suddenly finds themselves looking at what they already knew, what was part of their tradition from childhood on, something they'd been celebrating, storytelling and faithfully sharing with each other for as long as they remembered. Something they, and their parents and grandparents before them, had carried with them for many, many centuries, with different eyes, with a new understanding.

What they inherited from Jesus, what they could suddenly see because of him, because of the way he had lived and died, because of his enduring presence they'd sensed since Easter day, was boundaries coming down here and now. Barriers falling away, here and now, outsiders coming in, and insiders going out, here and now. They become aware of the new take Jesus has given them on living the law, of being part of God's Kingdom. That it is here and now, and that it is for everybody; Jew, Greek or otherwise. Breaking down the barriers, living in unity, welcoming the outsider in, and leaving their own limitations and hesitations behind, starting here and now. At this festival, at this time, just as they were, calling them into a future where dreams of old become reality, and God is so near it becomes tangible.

Doors that had been closed were opened, and suddenly they saw something that changed their world, their way of being, changed our world, our way of being, forever.

Kingdom living, the dream of abundance for all, of unity among nations, of outsiders and insiders speaking the same language and sharing God's grace and love indiscriminately amongst each other, became something that could be done, could be started, could be lived, here, now, in Jesus' name.

Does that warrant more than our cautious, half-hearted celebrations? Well, yes, probably. But perhaps it is, at the same time, difficult to expect ourselves to repeat that first moment of discovery and exultation, that first 'aha' moment of revelation and amazement, the uproar and bewilderment of reality being turned on its head, and a totally new way of perceiving it breaking in, over and over again, with the same energy and commitment.

It is not like that for us.

We know the story, we've heard it being told many times. Our culture has carried it for two thousand years, and that new, fresh, energetic sense of discovery that was there the first time has waned a bit.

And perhaps that is just how it is.

Perhaps we don't need to climb the rock to where the high winds are dangerously strong, but can appreciate the rock from down below, looking up and marvelling at the beauty and abundance of what God has given us, and experience the Spirit as a calm, quiet presence around us.

Perhaps for us, at this time, what is needed is a mindful awareness of living on God's breath, treasuring what we know and, having experienced God's love, sharing the stories that have been handed down. Faithfully celebrating the festivals as tradition has taught us with God, with the Spirit working on a different level, in a different way, busy finding new ways into our world, counting on us to have prepared the ground for it when it should need it, and radiating a sense of peace into the world, rather than over-the-top excitement.

Walking around Uluru's base some weeks ago, I wondered what it would be like, to climb to the top, to feel those strong winds, and discover what it was like to be there.

I didn't have the option. And in a way, I was glad I didn't. The sign "no entry, strong winds at the top", and awareness of cultural and religious issues kept me firmly, with both feet, on the ground, sheltered, where there was not even a discernible breeze.

Walking the 11km base walk, I realised that maybe this was not so bad after all. Instead of the exhilaration of danger and daring, there was the quiet, taking in the views, savouring the beauty that is there. I discovered the nooks and crannies I'd never seen on pictures, the surprising variety of rock, dust, scrub and trees. I realised I probably wouldn't have seen that in the same way if I'd rushed to the top to be caught up in high winds. I realised it even added to the mystique of the rock in some way, that part of it was not accessible to me, at least not at this time.

It strikes me that this could be an image of where we find ourselves as a Church at this time. At the base, firmly on the ground, out of the wind. Even though we may have a vague sense of curiosity about what it would be like to rush to the top to catch those strong winds, perhaps that is not where we are meant to be at the moment. That place of excitement and exhilaration may be reserved for others right now, while we take the views in at ground level. Perhaps wondering about the summit, but with no urgent need to get there ourselves. Paying close attention to the abundance God gives us here, now, trusting that the Spirit is working on more levels than one.

Who knows... there may be others experiencing those strong, summit, spirit winds at the moment. Maybe at the evangelical Church in the city I visited last week, where I felt an energy I haven't felt in our institutional environment for a long time. Or maybe it is in the small groups that are forming around social justice or environmental issues at the moment. Could it be in the intercultural, interfaith discussions I am sometimes part of, where sparks fly and emotions often run high?

For us, mostly, Faith is a bit more sedate than that. There is calm and peace, and the time to savour, take in and treasure the good gifts of God. And although it may feel like a long track at times, mostly it is fairly even, a bit like that base walk around Uluru. Not without surprises, full of beauty, and at times breathtaking, new perspectives, but quieter than I imagine it would be at the top, where the strong winds tear at your body.

This may be the quiet before the storm. Around the next corner, the wind may come howling at us, but it can equally be the quiet of an Autumn morning in the Clare Valley, with the sun coming out and fruit ripening on the vines. It could be God breathing comfort and strength into us so we can carry on, and keep the story of his love and care alive while he is working on the next phase of his history with us.

We don't know where and how the Spirit works. And it isn't for us to know.

What I do know is another thing that the Pentecost story tells us. The festival, the stories and the celebrations have been around for a very long time. God's people had been out of the wind for a while. But when the time came, they were there, ready for the Spirit to go to work with, ready for strong winds and some exploring of emotional peak experiences to be done.

It may happen again, it may even be happening now, without us realising it, working its way into our reality. Even while we walk around the base, looking up at the rock-solid presence of God and faith, grateful for the beauty, the abundance, the depth and breadth of what we've been given.
Amen.