

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 20 MAY 2012
EASTER 7, ASCENSION,
WESLEY SUNDAY
Rev'd Anneke Oppewal

Isaiah 32: 15-18,

¹⁵ until a spirit from on high is poured out on us, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. ¹⁶ Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. ¹⁷ The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust for ever. ¹⁸ My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting-places.

Luke 24: 49 - 53

⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." ⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Today, rather than offer a full blown sermon, I'd like to just make a couple of comments about the passages we read today and relate them to what we've heard about the remarkable journey of the Wesley brothers and Ascension Sunday.

First of all Isaiah: We hear that until a Spirit from on high is poured out the world is wilderness, wasteland, a God forsaken country. Only when that Spirit descends the wilderness becomes a fruitful field where justice dwells and righteousness abides, where there is peace, and quiet and trust forever. In other words: Where the Spirit descends miracles start to happen.

Then Luke telling us how Jesus, while he is withdrawing from his disciples, blesses them and promises them power will descend on them.

Luke tells us twice about the ascension, once at the end of the gospel and once at the beginning of Acts. And I wonder if there is any significance in that. It is as if he wants to emphasise that Jesus has gone, to emphasise the gap in divine presence in between resurrection and pentecost. For a while there is nothing but waiting. Waiting for power to descend, waiting for a promise to be fulfilled, waiting for the Spirit to fill the gap Jesus' departure has left.

I recognise my own feelings in the text Isaiah presents us with: like I am inhabiting a wasteland, a wilderness, a God forsaken world where injustice and strife are rife and where peace and trust are rare commodities. When I read the paper, but also when I am confronted with some of the grief and sadness people around me have to go through.

I also recognise myself in the image painted of the disciples after the ascension. Peering up to heaven, wondering what to do next. Left with an emptiness that somehow needs

filling. I don't know about you, but I sometimes find it difficult to hold on to the promise of the Spirit, the promise that God does not leave us orphaned.

The promise of Isaiah and of Luke's writings is that there may be the experience of a gap, of feeling abandoned, but that in the wilderness and wastelands of this world, of our lives, that where we feel left empty and desolately alone, God's Spirit is at work, God's Power comes as an agent of change. A power, a Spirit, that is able to ignite a storm.

And then I wonder. How is that Spirit, that Power at work right now, right here? Is it? I have to say I can't blame anyone for wondering if you see us on an ordinary Sunday gathering for worship, or if you meet us, in ordinary day to day life going about our business. Who can blame outsiders, when they look at us, to wonder where that Power, that Spirit we talk about is actually, visibly, tangibly at work?

We are very proud of being contained in our expressions of faith, in worship, private about our prayer life, quiet, good at doing some good here and some good there without too much upheaval. That is our tradition, that's how we were taught to give shape to our faith. Not to be ostentatious, boastful, noisy, or over-enthusiastic as some others.

And I wonder. Have we lost something there, along the way? Something important, something vital? How did we come to stop talking about the work of the Spirit altogether? About the presence of God? About the experience of a Power descending on us that is beyond understanding? Do we feel it? Does it mean anything?

Don't worry, I won't invite you to engage in a wild Toronto-type revival that will have us rolling down the aisles. Although it would be an interesting phenomena if it happened and I wonder what *The Age*, or *Crosslight* would make of it if it something like that happened in North Balwyn Uniting Church. And I won't even invite you to a Wesleyan revival, with us going out on the roads, driving half way to the moon and back to win people for Christ in parks and public places.

I would like to invite you though to consider what your experience is of that Power Isaiah talks about, the Spirit Jesus refers to, and how it is touching your life and shaping it. And if, perhaps, it is time to give it some slack, some room to move, so it can work in you, change you, change us, change whatever lies waste in our lives, in our congregation into something more fruitful and more exciting, more inspired and inspiring, more empowered and empowering.

To think back to the times when you've caught a glimpse, or perhaps more than a glimpse of that powerful Spirit experience the scriptures talk about, before and after Jesus walked among us.

I have been blessed with experiences like that, with feeling the Power of God taking me and shaking me. I never talk about it, and I am beginning to wonder more and more if that is the right thing to do. If part of our demise as a denomination is that we are proud of what we do, but forever fail to communicate to the world around us what it is that drives us, that burns in us, that pushes us, that pulls us towards a place that is different from the one we inhabit now.

And that that drive, that burning, that pushing and pulling is something that is not only something of the mind, of a rational decision for what we think of as a moral, ethically correct way of living, but that there is more involved. Something beyond our

understanding, beyond the immediate that we, at times, know to be at work, experience as an agent of change powering our spirit with its presence, moulding and shaping us so we take up the challenge and become agents of change ourselves.

Something that touches us and moves us into behaviour we would otherwise not exhibit. One week before Pentecost I want to leave you with the question where you see yourself, see our Church on the continuum between resurrection and Pentecost. Where is the joy? Where is the inspiration? Or are we stuck in that gap in the middle where we look up to heaven and wonder if lightning will ever strike again? Or are we well and truly past all that, in a wasteland where the Spirit Isaiah talks about, and the Power Jesus refers to are no longer regarded, even by us, people of the Church, as relevant, as touching our existence.

Where is our faith? Where is our enthusiasm about our faith? Where is the lived, inspired, powerful experience that set the world on fire back then? Or are we happy to look at what happened then with an indulgent smile, indicating that in our world, in our understanding, in our faith, there is no longer any room for that uncontrolled, uncontrollable movement to play a role?

Perhaps it is easier to leave it at that. More comfortable, less challenging, much easier to stay where we are, look up to heaven, and wait, rather than let the fire of the Spirit in and risk being burned, being changed, being swept away towards a future we may not recognise as the one we hoped for or imagined.

Amen.