

Sermon

Sunday 23 May 2021

Lesson

Acts 2: 1 – 13

The writer Angela Abraham creatively describes the effects of fireworks in her soul:

The fireworks are chaos and predictability - their explosive gifts finding their own time and space to own. As they do, I am the spectator, the one seeing their blazing trails arc above. There's something about them that warms me even in the cold, as if their stray sparks passed into my blood.

‘Sparks’ pass into her blood. For Abraham, fireworks bring light into darkness and warmth into coldness. How do we interpret the explosive imagery of Pentecost: the sound from heaven, the rushing mighty wind and the cloven tongues as of fire?

In biblical stories, the mighty wind and blazing fire are symbols of God’s presence. In the creation stories, it was by the wind or breath of God that humanity became a living creature. In the Book of Ezekiel, in the valley of the dry bones, it was by the four winds that the slain began to breathe, live and rise from death. In the wilderness at Mount Horeb Moses first encountered the mystery of God through

fire blazing from a bush and, later, on their desert pilgrimage, the Hebrew slaves were led by a pillar of fire. On the Day of Pentecost, when the believers were gathered together in one place, the presence of God overwhelmed and intoxicated them with newness of life.

In the Church, Pentecost or Whitsunday marks the 50th day after Easter. Commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples, it marks the beginning or birth of the worldwide church. Historically, Pentecost was a day of baptism; as such, a day of new birth, inner renewal and spiritual healing. Those to be baptised commonly dressed in white, the Sunday became known as ‘White Sunday’ or Whitsun. In some traditions, worshippers are encouraged to wear red representing tongues of fire.

The scriptural account of Pentecost is thrilling, inspiring and uplifting. Every believer was touched and transfigured by a tongue of fire, by the mystical presence of the Sacred. Incredibly, we learn that many people who had travelled hundreds of miles to be in Jerusalem heard the Galilean disciples speak in foreign languages: in

the native languages of Greeks, Judeans, Romans, Egyptians, Africans and Arabs. Through these earliest pilgrims, it seems the whole of the known world was set alight by a new revelation, a new experience of God. It is always a special moment when we hear someone from a foreign country speak in our language: it is an incident of joy, sharing, affirmation and union.

In 1947, Charles Warr, the Minister of St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh, invited German prisoners of war to attend public worship in the cathedral. Warr said that on a cold January morning, 'a strange congregation assembled in St Giles' when a thousand German POWs arrived in double-decker buses and army lorries from prison camps in Lanarkshire and East Lothian. At the service, the hymns were printed in English and German and so too the Creed and Lord's Prayer. The sermon was preached by the Revd Dr Golzen, a German who had joined the Church of Scotland. Dr Golzen preached in German and English. Warr said, 'The singing was terrific. The thousand German voices singing their native tongue completely drowned the Cathedral choir.' Was that a day of Pentecost, a

moment of miracle, on a cold January morning in Edinburgh? Sadly, the Lord Provost and city Magistrates declined to attend but had they been there, had we been there, would we too have felt upon our faces the waft of the mighty rushing wind and, with the eye of the heart, seen the tongues of fire?

Faith is a way of seeing the world. In the midst of tragedies, crises and traumas, I have been amazed many times, dazzled by fireworks – spiritual light and warmth – in the lives of so-called ordinary people who were enduring personal darkness and great suffering. While we may speak only for ourselves and not others, such stories may be a source of Pentecostal strength.

Born in the east coast US state of Massachusetts in 1890, Katharine Butler Hathaway, suffered tuberculosis of the spine. Her entire childhood was spent in her bedroom where she was pinned down to a board with her head and neck held in place by weights. Doctors hoped this would help her spine to grow straight. It did not work. She grew into adulthood hunched over and standing no taller than a

ten year old child. Incredibly, in her book, *The Little Locksmith*, Hathaway wrote of a happy childhood, which was shaped by imagination and an inquisitive mind. As an adult, at times she felt scorched by humiliation and isolated. The *New York Times* described her as ‘a rare spirit’. Pentecost is not a one-off event of two thousand years ago: the fire has burned ever since. Writing of her hardships, Hathaway said:

One day I found somewhere, on a page I have since forgotten, three words which had greater power than ever the doctor’s words. When I began to feel the horror coming on, I said to myself, ‘God within me ... God within me ... God within me.’ While I was saying those three words I felt and I know that I was no longer alone. Saying ‘God within me’ brought me an inrush of quietness and sweetness, a feeling inside me of dignity and wholeness which was not me at all, but something greater than I was, against which the horrors were powerless.

It is not nothing that can transform a life like that. The outward circumstances had not changed and yet everything had changed. Is this what miracle looks like? In a room in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, in a great Scottish cathedral and in an American child’s bedroom, there was a rushing mighty wind and tongues of fire. Amen.