

## Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Pentecost (2<sup>nd</sup> Service)

**Lectionary Readings:** Ezekiel 36: 22-28  
Psalm 139: 1-12, (13-18, 23-24)  
Acts 2: 22-38  
John 20: 19-23

I have, from the pulpit, asked the question – “Which is your favourite Christian Festival?” Usually there are a few ‘votes’ for Christmas but the majority are for Easter. I and a number of others, however, ‘vote’ for Pentecost.

Of course - you can't have one without the others, they are interdependent! Without Christmas there could be no Easter; without Easter the ‘Jesus Movement’ would have disappeared into the mysteries of time; without Pentecost the Saving message of Easter would never have been told by those early disciples and the early church would not have come into being.

Each of our readings today put an emphasis on the **Spirit** whose life changing and dramatic coming we celebrate today. It is a Spirit who transforms, guides, and directs lives – providing both perseverance and power when needed.

As we have seen before, Ezekiel was confronted with a nation that had turned away from Jehovah. He came from a Priestly family and was among the Jews exiled to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 597BC. In Ezekiel 1 and 2 we read of Ezekiel's first vision and his call as a Prophet: (Ezekiel 2)

<sup>1</sup> He said to me, ‘Son of man, <sup>1a</sup> stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.’

<sup>2</sup> As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.

<sup>3</sup> He said: ‘Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day.

<sup>4</sup> The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says.”

<sup>5</sup> And whether they listen or fail to listen – for they are a rebellious people – they will know that a prophet has been among them.

### Footnotes

- a. Ezekiel 2:1 The Hebrew phrase *ben adam* means *human being*. The phrase *son of man* is retained as a form of address here and throughout Ezekiel because of its possible association with ‘Son of Man’ in the New Testament.

The first 24 chapters of his book are “Oracles of Judgement against Israel” – typical headings in the NIV are those for chapters 15 and 16:

“*Jerusalem, a Useless Vine*” and “*An Allegory of Unfaithful Jerusalem*” respectively.

In chapter 36 the Lord, through Ezekiel, is saying to the Israelites that the “good” things He will do are not for their benefit but “*for the sake of His holy name*” – which they, the Israelites have profaned among the nations.

The purpose of this is **singular**: (Ezekiel 36: 23)

<sup>23</sup> I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them.

**Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.**

This is going to be achieved by the restoration of His ‘chosen people’ and the remainder of our reading tells us what the Lord will do for them.

We note, on this Pentecost Sunday, that there are two references to ‘spirit’. We find the first in verse 26:

<sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

We notice that the whole of the word “*spirit*” is in the lower case – the Lord would appear to be speaking of the ‘human spirit’. The New Century Version of the Bible renders the verse in this way:

<sup>26</sup> Also, I will teach you to respect me completely, and **I will put a new way of thinking inside you.**

I will take out the stubborn hearts of stone from your bodies, and I will give you obedient hearts of flesh.

The second reference is to Spirit with a capital S – “**MY Spirit**” says the Lord:

<sup>27</sup> And **I will put my Spirit in you** and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

The Message, in its paraphrase of verses 24-28 includes the final promise from the Lord to Israel:

<sup>24-28</sup> “For here’s what I’m going to do: I’m going to take you out of these countries, gather you from all over, and bring you back to your own land. I’ll pour pure water over you and scrub you clean. I’ll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you.

I’ll remove the stone heart from your body and replace it with a heart that’s God-willed, not self-willed.

**I’ll put my Spirit in you and make it possible for you to do what I tell you and live by my commands.**

**You’ll once again live in the land I gave your ancestors. You’ll be my people! I’ll be your God!**

As I began to read the opening words of Psalm 139 my thoughts were dominated by the melody of a song - I could not exactly remember the words but knew it was related to the Psalm.

A quick Google search bore no fruit – I did however come across a number of songs (mainly American) based on the Psalm. My next search was in the Scriptural index of Singing the Faith where I found where I found 5 hymns listed as being ‘completely’ based on this Psalm (as well as a further nine where particular hymn verses related to specific Scriptural verses in the Psalm).

The first of the ‘dedicated’ hymns was written by Charles Wesley (STF 366 – Thou hidden source of calm repose).

It was, however, the last of the five that turned up the words and melody which had been testing my memory.

That ‘annoyed’ me further!! - it is a very well known hymn, written in the twentieth century by Bernadette Farrell: (STF 728)

O God, you search me and You know me. All my thoughts lie open to your gaze. When I walk or lie down You are before me: Ever the Maker and Keeper of my days.	Before a word is on my tongue, Lord, You have known its meaning through and through. You are with me beyond my understanding: God of my present, my past and future, too.
You know my resting and my rising. You discern my purpose from afar, And with love everlasting You besiege me: In every moment of life or death, You are.	<b>Although Your Spirit is upon me,</b> Still I search for shelter from Your light. There is nowhere on earth I can escape You: Even the darkness is radiant in your sight.

For You created me and shaped me,  
Gave me life within my mother’s womb.  
For the wonder of who I am, I praise you:  
Safe in Your hands, all creation is made new.

The NIV Bible Commentary gives a title to this Psalm - “**The Lord Knows Me!**” and divides the text into four sections:

- I. The Lord’s discernment of Individuals (vv.1-6)
- II. The Lord’s perception of Individuals (vv.7-12)
- III. The Lord’s Purpose for Individuals (vv. 13-18)
- IV. Prayer for Vindication (vv.19-24)

The Lectionary Reading covers the first two of these sections with the option of including the third section and the last two verses of the Psalm; four verses (19-22) that contrast with the rest of the Psalm, and in modern days are perhaps seen as not being ‘politically correct’, are omitted:

- <sup>19</sup> If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!  
<sup>20</sup> They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name.  
<sup>21</sup> Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?  
<sup>22</sup> I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.

The first six verses speak of the things the Lord knows about us and the next six ponder the question ‘Where can I go to escape the Lord?’ – with the inevitable answer; nowhere, the Lord is everywhere and in everything.

The third ‘stanza’ of six verses gives an explanation – the Lord being the Creator, has known each of us from our time in the womb.

The last two verses of this section reflect on the thoughts of God:

- <sup>17</sup> How precious to me are your thoughts God! How vast is the sum of them!  
<sup>18</sup> Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand – when I awake, I am still with you.

Where we read “*How precious to me are your thoughts*”, an alternative translation is offered – “*How amazing are your thoughts concerning me*”. We could argue that the picture of the Lord thinking about us fits more closely with the theme of the preceding verses.

After the four omitted verses the Psalm ends with two that fit into the section title above – “Prayer for Vindication”.

David is making a request, expecting to be forgiven and then looking to the Lord for guidance:

- <sup>23</sup> Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
<sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Our gospel reading takes us back to the first Easter Day. Only John and Luke record Jesus appearing to His disciples on the evening of that first day (Mark, we remember, has a section of text which appears to have been added later, gleaned material from the other gospels).

It is only in John that we read:

- <sup>21</sup> Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’  
<sup>22</sup> **And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.**  
<sup>23</sup> If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’

The Holy Spirit – given on Easter Day?

A footnote in the NIV Study Bible suggests:

Thus anticipating what happened 50 days later on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The disciples needed God's help to carry out the commission they had just been given.

In Luke there is no mention of Jesus breathing on His disciples and no direct mention of the Holy Spirit. He explains to them the writings in Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms which refer to the Messiah: (Luke 24)

<sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

<sup>46</sup> He told them, 'This is what is written: the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup>

<sup>8</sup> You are witnesses of these things.

<sup>49</sup> **I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'**

It is of course Luke who takes this story forward in 'Acts' and in chapter 1 we find references to the Holy Spirit, similar to those made in his gospel: (Acts 1)

<sup>4</sup> On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: '**Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.**

<sup>5</sup> **For John baptised with (in) water, but in a few days you will be baptised with (in) the Holy Spirit.'**

<sup>6</sup> Then they gathered round him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'

<sup>7</sup> He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

<sup>8</sup> **But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'**

<sup>9</sup> After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

<sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'

I would love to have been in that house, along with the disciples, on the day of Pentecost – the day that the Lord released the promised power - the sound of a mighty rushing wind; the visual image of tongues of fire; the 'foreign' languages in which they were all suddenly fluent.

I remember a 'frivolous' comment made by the Worship Leader Chris Bowater about the day of Pentecost, but a comment to good effect – "They didn't come out of the house, the upper room, in single file but as a 'holy pile.'"

Such was the effect of their being filled with the Holy Spirit.

The speaking in tongues was for a purpose – it being Pentecost, God-fearing Jews from all over the 'known' world had come to Jerusalem for the Festival. They now heard the disciples telling of the wonders of God in their own languages – what did it mean?

Peter, it would appear, had only addressed the assembled believers up to this time. They kept themselves to themselves in that upper room – for fear of the Jewish authorities?

Now, filled with the Holy Spirit, he addresses the whole crowd, locals and visitors, who have assembled. The 'sermon' starts with his quoting the prophet Joel: (Joel 2: 28-32)

<sup>17</sup> "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.

<sup>18</sup> Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

<sup>19</sup> I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke.

<sup>20</sup> The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

This is followed immediately by the powerful, Spirit inspired, words of our reading. He may once have been fearful but now he is fearless and states that it is they, his listeners, who "*with the help of wicked men (alternative – of those not having the law), put him to death by nailing him to the cross*".

It was God's deliberate plan and it was God who raised Him from death. He goes back to David in the Old Testament, stating that Jesus was a descendant – inheriting the throne. "*Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay*".

Peter then declares:

<sup>32</sup> God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.

<sup>33</sup> **Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.**

After quoting David again Peter concludes this first 'sermon' with the following words:

<sup>36</sup> 'Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.'

We then read of the crowd's reaction to what Peter has said and his further instructions to them:

<sup>37</sup>When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'

<sup>38</sup>Peter replied, '**Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**

If the reading had continued to verse 41 we would have noted:

<sup>39</sup>The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.'

<sup>40</sup>With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'

<sup>41</sup>**Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.**

Three thousand new, baptised, believers as the result of one 'sermon'! - Wow!!

In John's Gospel we find Jesus saying to His disciples "*As the Father has sent me, I am sending you*" and in Mark 16: 9-19; that later addition – we find the Great Commission:

<sup>15</sup>He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.

<sup>16</sup>Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

J.B.Philips in his 'translation' gave a title to The Acts of the Apostles – it was "**The Young Church in Action**". It is the gripping story of the apostles and disciples going out, Spirit filled, to fulfil that Great Commission of Jesus.

**And what should that say to us for today?**

Away with our fears,  
Our troubles and tears:  
The Spirit is come,  
The witness of Jesus returned to His home.

The pledge of our Lord  
To His heaven restored  
Is sent from the sky,  
And tells us our Head is exalted on high.

Our advocate there  
By His blood and His prayer  
The gift hath obtained,  
For us He hath prayed, and the Comforter gained.

Our glorified Head  
His Spirit hath shed,  
With His people to stay,  
And never again will He take Him away.

Our heavenly Guide (MHB 278)  
With us shall abide,  
His comforts impart,  
And set up His kingdom of love in the heart.

The heart that believes  
His kingdom receives,  
His power and His peace,  
His life, and His joy's everlasting increase.

Then let us rejoice  
In heart and in voice,  
Our Leader pursue,  
And shout as we travel the wilderness through:

With the Spirit remove  
To Zion above,  
Triumphant arise,  
And walk with our God, till we fly to the skies.

Charles Wesley

Go to the world! Go into all the earth.  
Go preach the cross where Christ renews life's worth,  
Baptising as the sign of our rebirth.  
Alleluia!

Go to the world! Go into every place.  
Go live the word of God's redeeming grace.  
Go seek God's presence in each time and space.  
Alleluia!

Go to the world! Go struggle, bless, and pray; (STF 402)  
The nights of tears give way to joyous day.  
As servant Church, you follow Christ's own way.  
Alleluia!

Go to the world! Go as the ones I send,  
For I am with you till the age shall end,  
When all the hosts of glory cry, 'Amen!'  
Alleluia!

Sylvia G. Dunstan

How small a spark has lit a living fire!  
How small a flame has warmed a bitter world!  
How great a heart was moved to hope, to dare  
And bring the faith out in the open air!

No boundary sign will stand against this faith,  
No wall restrain this preaching of the Word:  
The Good News travels on, it rides the road  
And draws to unity the realm of God.

The single note becomes a psalm of praise, (STF 408)  
The single voice grows to a swelling choir  
And born in song, new stories now are sung

Thank God for all who listened and believed,  
Who still are by the Spirit set on fire -  
Our hearts be warmed again, for Christ will wait  
On beach, in upper room, or Aldersgate.

Shirley Erena Murray