Sermon for Pentecost Sunday Year C

Readings: Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17

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Those who know me personally will be shocked to learn that there have been rare occasions in my life when I have felt like inflicting actual bodily harm – or least I hope those who know me will be shocked by the idea. I was once renowned in my school days for my crunching tackles in both soccer and rugby and earned the nick-name “Brick-wall-Boggy,” but that was always in the spirit of the game. So what drives me to occasional fits of rage?

People who won’t wait in a queue send me nuts. At Ciampino airport in Rome I frequently had to calm myself down as people pushed in ahead of those of us who had been forming an orderly line. We British may have lost our winning ways in cricket and soccer, but we can beat all-comers when it comes to forming a queue.

Let me commend the art of waiting to an impatient world! Especially let me commend the art of waiting on the Lord to activist, impatient, results-driven Christians.

Waiting on the Lord helps concentrate the mind on God, rather than on ourselves. It reminds us that we are working for God and not the other way round. It brings it home to us that it is in the Lord’s strength that we must go and not in our own. It enables us to embrace the cosmic spiritual dimension of our enterprise and reminds us that we are playing a very small part in a huge historic drama.

We Methodists ought to be better at waiting on the Lord than we often are. Wesley rushed off to America when Charles was offered a post as secretary to General Oglethorpe in the new colony of Georgia. John decided he would go too and take on a pastoral charge in Savannah as the base from which he planned to evangelise the Native Americans. They were grand plans, but they were his grand plans, and evidently the Lord had other plans for him and, as it turned out, for Charles too.

Upon their hasty return to England from their unsuccessful mission both Wesley brothers were rather lost and despondent. John contemplated abandoning holy orders altogether, but was saved from that precipitous action by the Moravian Peter Boehler who advised Wesley to wait on the Lord and to continue to “preach faith until you have it.”

Between February and May 1738 John waited upon the Lord. Those cannot have been easy months. His dream of doing a mighty work for the Lord in Georgia had crumbled and the way ahead he simply couldn’t discern. That all famously changed on 24 May 1738 shortly before a quarter to nine when he felt his heart “strangely warmed.” Charles had had a similar experience the previous Sunday, Pentecost Sunday. The Holy Spirit had empowered them in a new way and equipped them for an historic, transformative contribution to the mission of the Church.

Methodists used to try to emulate such waiting on the Lord in frequent Watchnight services, but in today’s fast moving world, the art has all but disappeared. It is a skill we should cultivate again in some form or other.

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The disciples were sent by Jesus to wait in Jerusalem for the power that would come upon them from above (Luke 24:49). On Pentecost their wait came to an end and they were then ready to be sent out to preach the Good News to all nations.

Whilst the experience of the Holy Spirit is a crucial feature of what happened at Pentecost and more of that later, another important thing about Pentecost is of course that it inaugurates a new age – the age of the Church is launched.

There are parallels between the mission of the Church and the Exodus. In the original Exodus from Egypt, the people of God were being led by the Spirit across a hostile place, escaping slavery and death in Egypt and heading towards their freedom and home. Moses is the only one who has really intimate encounters with God and even he can only look upon God’s back, not look at God face to face.

In the new exodus of the age of the Church, God’s people are leaving behind the slavery and death of sin, but now everyone who calls Jesus “Lord” is filled with the intimate knowledge of God. Now all may see God face to face in Jesus, “whoever has seen me,” says Jesus to his disciples, “has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

Now the Father and the Son make their home through the Holy Spirit in the heart of each believer. The faithful have a foretaste of what it will be like when they reach home – for God is already with them in in their exodus journey through this life.

In the new exodus, the Church is open to everyone of any nationality to follow on and travel through this world in safely, in fellowship with God and with one another and find their way home, to their heavenly Jerusalem.

The times prophesied of old by Joel have now come to pass, says Peter in his Pentecost proclamation (Acts 2:16-21). On Pentecost a new age came to birth. God has decisively acted; the course of the world is heading in a new direction. The people of God have been defined in a new way and the journey ahead is led by Christ. Pentecost isn’t just about a joyful experience for a few people who choose to believe in Jesus – Pentecost has changed the course of history – forever.

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The other important change brought about by Pentecost is how we experience the divine.

Many religions have their various ways for adherents to experience altered states of consciousness and have some degree of encounter with what I would call God. I do not wish to question or malign their claims in any way, but Christianity does have its own distinctive manner of speaking about religious experience that is worth noting on this special day.

The Jewish tradition had men and occasionally women who were empowered by the Holy Spirit, often said to have “received the Word of the Lord”, and who were conscious of God’s nearer presence and felt a message had been laid upon them which they had to deliver to the world, sometimes at great cost to themselves.

Prophets came and prophets went. Rare was the day that God had not sent his people a guiding or a challenging voice. But such prophets were nonetheless unusual and experienced God in a way that was not shared by the people of God at large.

In the days before John the Baptist many generations had passed without a prophet at all arising to show the people the way.

So within the Jewish tradition a dream began to take shape. It is the dream expressed most eloquently by the prophet Joel who Peter quotes on the day of Pentecost:

*I will pour out my spirit upon everyone. Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message; your young men will see visions, and your old men will have dreams.”*

Elsewhere, Jeremiah speaks of God’s name being written on **every** heart.

The first Christians believed that this universal outpouring of the Spirit of God had come at Pentecost. Now every believer may know inwardly the presence of God.

This is the **experiential** side of Christian faith which bids us **feel** God’s presence, as opposed to the **intellectual** side of the faith set out in its dogmas and creeds which we are called on to **believe** intellectually, and as opposed to its **practical** side as expressed in its works of charity and justice which we are called to **perform**.

Methodism holds a particularly high regard for the experiential side of Christian faith: Charles Wesley’s hymns refer again and again to **feeling** God:

*My God! I know, I feel Thee mine*

*And will not quit my claim*

*Till all I have is lost in Thine*

*And all renewed I am.*

Both John and Charles **believed** the Gospel message prior to Aldersgate; both of them **performed** their Christian charitable duties, going so far as to become ordained priests and undertake a mission to Georgia; but until their **experience** of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in May 1738, they were not ready or able to fulfil their calling.

The Wesley brothers quickly became extremely wary about those who claimed a powerful religious experience for they knew it could lead to fanaticism, anti-intellectualism and an unhealthy pressure on others to feign a similar emotional state.

But once they had built up the regulating influence of the Class Meeting and the Band Meeting, they could test all those claims to ecstatic assurance and growth in holiness against the standards of Scripture, the tradition of the Church, and simple common sense.

Wesley believed that we possess spiritual senses which lay dormant until awakened by the New Birth, but thereafter these new senses could be taught how to discern the presence and guidance of God which would lead towards growth in holiness.

Given the regulating forces of the church community, Methodists especially and Christians of all Christ’s family, should not despise the inner life of the spirit when God’s “Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom 8:16).

The disciples believed in Jesus Christ and knew his resurrection at first hand, but even they needed to wait upon the Holy Spirit before the life of the Church could be born into the world. It was the **experience** of Pentecost that sent the disciples, now apostles, running into the streets of Jerusalem proclaiming the Gospel message.

We may not care for the world’s derision that thinks the apostles have drunk too much wine. But rather the world mock us for drunkards and fools than to be so lifeless, that the world just considers the Church nothing but a bore.

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