

Pentecost (Acts 2. 29-39)

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As many of you know, I am giving a series of talks in Rome towards the end of June on the theme of meditation and monastic life. In my final talk, which I've been working on this week, I'm focusing on what it means to **be** a contemplative church, a church whose life is shaped by this way of prayer. I'm exploring this question, not because I want to get all precious and self-conscious about contemplative identity – but because it seems to me and to many that the renewal of a contemplative consciousness is necessary for the renewal of the whole church. Necessary too for the healing of our frenetic, alienated, distracted world. If this is so, then it behoves us to deepen our sense of what a contemplative consciousness actually is – and what it makes possible. I want to share a bit of that reflection with you tonight.

This might seem a strange choice of theme for a Pentecost reflection. The contemplative and the charismatic can seem at opposite ends of the spiritual spectrum. Contemplation is for introverts, isn't it? It's about silence, stillness, solitude. Charismatic expressions are often seen, by contrast, to be extroverted, even noisy. The Spirit poured out on the disciples at Pentecost was mistaken for drunkenness – remember? Charismatic spirituality is about energy, boldness, the vitality of community. How then do these contemplative and charismatic spiritualities relate to each other? Well, I think, more closely than our usual categories tend to allow.

The passage we've just heard follows the famous story in Acts, Chapter 2 about the giving of the Holy Spirit. The disciples are gathered together on the day of Pentecost, there's a sound like the rush of a violent wind, divided tongues – as of fire

– rest on each person, and they begin to speak in other languages. They’re accused of being drunk, although it’s only nine o’clock in the morning. So Peter rises to address the sneering crowd. This is no babbling rabble, he cries! It’s the fulfilment of prophecy. It belongs to the story of the people of Israel. It’s the culmination of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who is now exalted at the right hand of God. It is he, Peter says, who ‘having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit ... has poured out this that you both see and hear’. Cut to the heart, the crowd asks Peter what they must do. And he tells them to turn back to God (repent), to hand themselves over without conditions (be baptised in the name of Jesus), and so receive the gift of this same Spirit, this energy of God’s own life.

The word ‘receive’ is key. Jesus has ‘received’ from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit; the disciples will ‘receive’ in turn this same Spirit when they give themselves over as Jesus did. The Spirit cannot be seized or earned, it cannot be grasped or possessed. It is only ever given as we are radically given over to God.

And here’s the connection between the contemplative and the charismatic. Because it’s just this radical self-giving, this unconditional openness to God, which is the practice of contemplative prayer. Meditation is about letting go our agenda, our self-protection and self-righteousness, even our thoughts about ourselves and about God – *everything* let go so that we may be open ‘to all the fullness the Father wishes to pour into our hearts’. Rowan Williams describes it this way: ‘With our minds made still and ready to receive, with our self-generated fantasies about God and ourselves reduced to silence, we are at last at the point where we may begin to grow’. Jesus is our model for this. He is wholly transparent to the life of God – he receives *his* life wholly as gift. This is how we too are invited to let ourselves be sourced – personally and corporately.

On the Feast of Pentecost, we remember that the church is only the church insofar as it receives its life this way, sourced in the life of God. The church is nothing other than this – not an organisation, not a system, not an institution. It *lives* and is

life-giving only as it practises an ever-deepening self-emptying and dispossession, transparent to the divine life. And that is why contemplative prayer is always a necessary feature of the church's life and key to its renewal.

Of course, any community needs organisational form – ways of ordering its life. We've discovered that already at Benedictus. So it's not that the true church should not have need of such systems. The problem comes only when these become ends in themselves. For, as we well know, our church as a system, an organisation, an institution is not noted for its willingness to hand itself over, to let go its identity, security and righteousness so as to receive its life vulnerably, humbly, non-possessively as gift. In fact, all too often, it's the reverse. We're anxiously preoccupied with survival and relevance, self-defensive and frightened of change. We seek to secure our identity through the exercise of controlling power and social conformity. In truth, we the church fail time and again to live from and entrust ourselves to the possibility of the transformation we proclaim.

And this matters – not because people will get sick of us and leave, not because our institution might collapse. They should get sick of us if we're just another self-serving system, trying to secure our place. No – it matters, because we have been invited to live from a different reality, vitalised by a different energy. The energy of the Spirit of God which, as Jesus showed, is present always as life-bestowing, reconciling, liberating. This is the gift we're commissioned to share – through our work, our service, our relationships, and our daring to embark on our own journeys of healing and transformation.

For, the truth is, the darkness and alienation in us and in the world cannot be shifted by the energy of this world ... by people and systems anxious for their own security, frightened to let go 'the devil' they know (and that's a revealing phrase). They cannot be shifted by people and systems constrained by the fear of death and judgement. The church's culpable non-response to revelations of child abuse over these past decades is ample evidence of that. The darkness of the world, the

darkness of the church, will never be shifted by the energy that generates the darkness in the first place. What's needed are people and systems liberated from these constraints – filled with love of truth, moved by compassion, unafraid to die in the service of authentic life. What's needed is the subversive, counter-cultural energy of the Spirit.

At the Feast of Pentecost, we remember that this Spirit is given to any who will open to receive it. Mostly it won't look dramatic – the rush of a mighty wind. Often it will feel like grief, or a painful and deepening awareness of the depth of our need for healing and acceptance. But as we dare to yield ourselves, as we dare to receive, we become bearers of this gift to others. We are emboldened to live from its energy and proclaim its truth. We become able to give ourselves for love of the world, as Jesus did. And so we become, at last, the church we are called to be, a church that is indeed good news for the world.