

PENTECOST

23 MAY 2021

The Prophet Ezekiel 37. 1-14

Acts of the Apostles 2. 1-21

Romans 8. 22-27

John 15. 26 – 16. 15

In our current, non-religious, even anti-religious, climate I find that people will readily say about themselves in relation to religious faith, particularly Christianity, when wanting to somehow justify a disinterest in Christian practice: *Oh, I'm spiritual but not religious*. I find the disclaimer a rather passive-aggressive, even patronising response. The inference is: *I'm spiritual but not religious. I have moved on, beyond all that religious mumbo-jumbo; pity you haven't moved on!*

Pentecost is one of our three most significant Christian festivals: Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. The coming of the spirit, envisioned in Ezekiel, is the event which makes the church. And it is a festival which is utterly about spirit. So what, I find myself asking, have we done or not done, which has led people to believe that the Christian life is not about spirit; about being spiritual?

In preparation for the Church Council Planning Day on 15th May, Church Councillors and Formation Group members read an article by the north American specialist in church leadership, Alan Roxburgh. The piece we read is entitled "The Great Unravelling". In it Alan charts the great unravelling of what he calls the "Euro-tribal" churches in north America in the decades since WWII, especially since the early 1960s. He describes "Euro-tribal" churches as those churches which emigrated their religious identities and sectarianism from Europe to the New World; in Roxburgh's case, North America, in our case Australia. We imported our divisions and our certainties across the globe and planted our flags of religious identity here.

While the context of his writing is north American, everything Alan has to say rings true in the Australian context. He contends that since the early 60s, the point at which the church was at its numerical peak, we have been bewitched by the decline of the church and have done everything in our power to halt or reverse the unravelling we have undergone during this time. Most of us have lived through this time and while just about everything we have touched in our lives in Australia during this time has turned to gold, the state and contraction of the church has defied our power. I hear distress about this in so many ways – individually and collectively - and a sense of guilt that we have somehow failed to stem or reverse this trend. Members of congregations have felt they have failed, ministers have felt incompetent and become depressed about this climate of contraction in which we have worked, and in some quarters are blamed for the decline – or at least are labelled as useless because we have not been able to reverse this unravelling.

The challenging thing about this material we read for last Saturday is that Alan Roxburgh contends that this unravelling has been the work of the Holy Spirit, the work of God. Really? God has been behind the decline of the church? But, we told ourselves that all those brimming Sunday schools were the work and the blessing of God. How could this be?

The truth is, the witness of scripture is that God is often involved in, even driving, disruption and dislocation. Time and again. Consistently, the spirit upsets, demolishes and burns away the dross. And then comes renewal, salvation, redemption, restoration. The central Christian image for this

is death and resurrection. Is this what has been taking place? If it has, if we can discern that this is what has been happening – that it has been God’s work, not our failure - then how might we be differently as people of faith? How might we regard what has taken place, how might we regard ourselves and our activity? How might we regard each other? How might we orient ourselves toward the future, then? Not with a sense of failure and hopelessness, I imagine, but of hope! But we have to give up the idea that it is all up to us. What freedom!

Mother Teresa said that God doesn’t want us to be successful, just faithful. The post war decades have been ones of unprecedented success on so many fronts. At some level we have told ourselves that our prosperity is divinely bestowed. But as Stan Grant tells us, the Great Australian Dream has been built on the backs of the aboriginal people. Blessing for some; not so for others. Slowly we are recognising the complicity of all of us in this travesty. Where might the spirit take us as we acknowledge this?

Luke gives us the story of the Day of Pentecost – it is a story which is gift of imagination which continues to bless us and yield meaning and purpose for us as Christ’ people. The disciples have huddled together for seven weeks since Passover and the death of Jesus and his mysterious appearances to them. Probably they have been paralysed with a sense of terrible guilt and failure. They have been frightened and unsure about what the future would hold and without a doubt, they would have been silent about what had been done to Jesus and the movement to which they had given themselves so fully. Nevertheless, they were told by Jesus to wait for “power from on high”. As the wind blows amongst them, they are given tongues as of fire and speak of the mighty acts of God. They were meant to be silent. The point of crucifixion was they were meant to be silenced by the brutality of it all. But with the coming of the spirit they now could not help but speak of what they had come to know in Jesus. Uneducated fisherman and Galilean, Peter, makes a speech and quotes the prophet Joel. When the spirit comes, he envisions, it will not be the powerful, old men who will speak of God but it will be women and men, children, both female and male; it will be poor and rich alike who are inspired and speak of God.

In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

We have come to the end of an era; the church we have known has unravelled and we are left with what is like a pile of shapeless wool on the floor. What will become of this, we might ask, as Ezekiel wonders what could possibly come of a pile of dry bones. Only you know, O Lord!

The trappings of the religious worlds which spawned the churches of which we are the inheritors are trappings which too often had little to do with the life of the spirit. These churches were shaped by doctrinal and political sectarianism. They were formed along racial – if not racist – lines. They were protected by violent and oppressive rulers and sex-crazed monarchs and they oppressed women and people of different sexualities. Too often they defined themselves by

what they were against, by what they were not - in the name of the God who made all things and said that it was good; even very good. Was all this the work of the spirit? Those who say well, I'm spiritual but not religious would probably say no. And rightly.

Alan Roxburgh, as well as contending that it is the spirit of God who has been at work in the great unravelling also contends that God is not done with the Euro-tribal churches. That it is not over. This is sign for hope. This is a hopeful place.

The disciples have been together. Waiting. Watchful, as Jesus so often encourages the disciples to be; like the bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom. The disciples are not just in a room together in one place but they are together in spirit. And they finally recognise the spirit of Christ powerfully amongst them. And they speak!

This moment will come. The spirit will not fail. God doesn't cease to see the suffering of the world, nor fails to hear the longing of the church for redemption, indeed, the whole creation for liberation. So, we wait with patience. We wait and work faithfully. This is a waiting with hope; a place of spiritual devotion and a spiritual virtue; a gift given by God.

So, we can wait in joy, alert to the possibility of the advent of God's Christ and the renewal of all things as we continue to pray: Come, Holy Spirit!

Andrew Boyle