

Over the last few weeks I have been recording sessions of collective worship for the learning hub at Christ Church School. It has been an interesting experience, learning how to use yet another computer programs, but also trying to say something the young people will find helpful. In preparing the video for this coming week, I came across a way of telling the Pentecost story through blowing up a balloon.

You start with an empty balloon and explain that after Jesus Ascension the early church was lifeless and even full of fear but God sent the spirit, and the spirit filled the church, just like air fills a balloon giving it shape and purpose. The spirit of God gives us shape and identity and helps us to share the message of God's love. I found this a very helpful analogy. The reminder that it is God that gives us shape and purpose.

But it also helped me with something else I have been struggling with during lock down. I have been witness to, and also participated in, many conversations about whether in closing its doors as we had been instructed the Church has let people down. While I have not encountered that widely, many others have. Though I have had some tell me that the Church should always be a place of refuge so should never be closed. And they are correct. The church is never closed. But what is the church.

Pentecost has long been seen in many respects as the birthday of the church, the moment when the church began to grow and share the message of Jesus beyond those first few disciples. And it has never stopped growing since that day of Pentecost. While many might say that the Church is dying, in fact the number of Christians in the world continues to grow.

But what is the Church? What is filled by the spirit and given shape?

I had a really helpful reminder during the week, in the face of all the debate about the lockdown and the time of churches opening their doors. It came in the words of the Bishop Elect of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Missouri, Deon K. Johnson. He was responding to a press release from President Trump that all churches should open their doors immediately. This is what the Bishop said in response.

"The work of the church is essential.

The work of caring for the lonely, the marginalized, and the oppressed is essential.

The work of speaking truth to power and seeking justice is essential.

The work of being a loving, liberating, and life giving presence in the world is essential.

The work of welcoming the stranger, the refugee and the undocumented is essential.

The work of reconciliation and healing and caring is essential.

The church does not need to "open" because the church never "closed".

We who make up the Body of Christ, the church, love God and our neighbours and ourselves so much that we will stay away from our buildings until it is safe. We are the church."

It is a very powerful reminder of what the spirit of Pentecost shaped us to be – not a building but a body!

And the thing about this body, is that while it aspires to do all the things which the Bishop listed, it is also a body that is human and therefore sometimes it is messy and complicated. Sometimes it is even uncomfortable, or behaves in a way that we personally think it should not. Sometimes we struggle with how best to be and do the things which the spirit of God asks us.

But in essence that is the message of Pentecost. If the disciples thought that the coming of the promised Holy Spirit was going to make things easier – they missed the point! The Holy Spirit doesn't remove the disciples from challenges and hardships, but rather equips and shapes them to persevere, even flourish, amid these challenges.

In John, for instance, the disciples are hiding in the upper room out of fear that those who crucified Jesus may come after them. And what does Jesus do as he breathes the Holy Spirit upon them? He doesn't take them away from Jerusalem or fortify the room in which they're hiding, but instead he sends them out into that dangerous world: "As the Father sent me, so I now send you" (20:21), and then he gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit to create in them the courage they will need to follow Jesus' command. He gives them shape and purpose.

Similarly in Acts, the disciples are waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit and, once it comes, they go out to proclaim the good news to a people who are likely to be sceptical if not outright hostile to their message. The Spirit gives them shape and purpose.

Again in Paul, the Spirit is given to enable individual believers to look beyond their individual needs, hopes, or fears and equip them with distinct gifts, all in order to work together for the "common good" (1 Cor. 12:7).¹ It gives them shape and purpose.

The spirit inspires and unsettles – but it also provides as with the strength to face all that is before us – it gives us shape to know who we are as the body of Christ, that is the Church!

So often the spirit can be seen as a personal or even individual thing, but that was not the case at Pentecost nor is it the case now! We need to recognize that while we may often hope that God will remove us from challenging or difficult situations, God often instead comes along side of us in the presence of the Holy Spirit in order to strengthen and equip us to endure, and even to flourish, amid these challenges and difficulties. Why? Perhaps because God may actually be working through us for the common good, to care for the need of our neighbours, community, and world.

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/05/pentecost-a-with-not-from/>

Pentecost is a celebration, and Celebration is a good thing. As part of this service each year we are invited to respond to a series of questions which are a commission to live out our Easter and Pentecost faith within our community – that is to continue to be faithful disciples like all those who have gone before us.

These are not new questions – and in fact the church has asked these questions of commission for many generations – they are a re-affirmation of the commitment we make at baptism – of the commitment we make each Easter. They are a reminder that faithfulness to God is an action which requires our whole being and our whole life. But I think this year, when we are not constrained in the shape of our buildings we have an opportunity to hear these words afresh and to consider the difficult questions of how we are the church. What shape and purpose does the spirit of God give us in our communities?

We are faithful as we pray for one another, and for the needs of the world each day. We are faithful as we read the bible and study it, considering what it says to us in this context. We are faithful as we share our faith, are proud of our faith, and are visible as followers of Christ. We are faithful in our care of one another, in our care of those who are in need and vulnerable. We are faithful when we share food and clothing and offer shelter.

The final prayer we will use today uses the phrase ‘invite the spirit to drive us out into the wild places of the world’. In this context this doesn’t mean going into the wilderness – - it is more about embracing the messiness we spoke of at the start; or the painfulness of our world - taking the light of Christ into places where it is unknown and messy. It is about holding onto the shape of God in the face of this pandemic.

And so today we celebrate the birth of the Church – the day when a few disciples shared their faith with people from different languages and cultural to them – and the church began to grow. We celebrate the joy of our faith – the faithfulness that it calls us to in the midst of all the challenges that face us as a community. And most importantly we commit to ourselves to be the church – not a building but a body. Shaped by the spirit of God. Amen.