

St Paul's Parish, Napier
Sunday 19 May 2024

The Day of Pentecost marks fifty days since Easter Day and brings the Easter season to an end. It is a major feast of the Church's year when Christians recall how God's Holy Spirit was given to the disciples after Jesus' ascension, empowering them to begin the work of "making disciples of all nations."

Pentecost (which comes from the Greek word for 'fiftieth') has its roots in the Jewish Feast of Weeks, the beginning of the early wheat harvest, just one of a number of festivals, celebrations, or observances - there was Passover, there was Unleavened Bread, and there was the Feast of Firstfruits.

In our reading this morning we are told that Jesus had promised his followers, although they would not see him after his Ascension, they would receive the Holy Spirit to guide and inspire them.

'When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.'

The crowds had gathered in Jerusalem – representing many nationalities and speaking many languages and they were able to hear the disciples preaching in their own language.

The colour most often associated with Pentecost is red, representing the tongues of fire appearing above the heads of the disciples as a sign that they had received the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost is usually considered to be the birth of the Christian church, it marks the beginning of the Christian churches mission to the world. If Pentecost is the birthday of the Christian church, where is the birthday cake? Where is the birthday party?

So Pentecost was the beginning of the church's mission to the world but, what is that mission and if it is so important, why are our church's declining in numbers and influence?

There are several things to ponder here.

Firstly, initially there was no church, certainly no institution or formal structure. There was a community endeavouring to follow the way of Jesus, people who were trying to be good neighbours just as Jesus had taught them (Mark 12: 13) – there are apparently 18 verses in the bible that have the commandment 'love thy neighbour' or words of a similar meaning.

They lived by faith in a world where power and violence were the order of the day. They were exploring what it meant to be followers of Jesus, a way of life that was at odds with the prevailing authorities. They didn't have administrators or head offices or creeds or rules. They lived by the commandment of Jesus to love their neighbour and to love one another.

At some stage the church became an institution, concerned about preserving the influence of those in power. To enforce the institution, authority was established by rules, and creeds were written so that the church could define who was in and who was out.

Somewhere in here the mission of the church became defined, and implemented, as "convert everyone to our way of thinking". We know the impact of this – the Episcopal Inquisition and the Papal Inquisitions of the 12th and 13th centuries that were followed by the Spanish, Roman and Portuguese inquisitions in the 15th century – these are just some examples of the zealous interpretation of "the mission of the church".

This corruption of the mission even extends today in the southern bible belt of the USA where the mantra "those who don't believe with us, are not part of us" is prevalent. Philip Yancy's, in his book, "Soul Survivor" tells of his struggle to cope with, and escape from, that mantra.

Given that the happenings at Pentecost were witnessed by "people of all nations" and thousands were baptised, it seems the message of Jesus is for all people, not just the few. The efforts of the institutional church to exclude people seems to me to be wrong. I'll come back to this point.

Now taking that first point a bit further, if the mission of the church was originally to "proclaim the message" (Acts 2:17 & 17), what was the message? Reading on in Acts we hear Peter saying to the crowd "each one of you must turn away from your sins and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ". Over many decades and centuries this message has been a driving force in the life of the church. But we are well aware of the consequences of the institutional, hierarchical church's zealotry about the implementation of the mission. Over the years the institutionalised church has developed a set of beliefs and in turn a set of creeds and statements about faith. As I've said if we agree with these statements we are part of the in-crowd. If you don't agree you are out!

John Cobb an American theologian sees the development and abuse of creeds as a bad thing. "Creeds were affirmed and enforced to maintain the unity of the institution....putting creeds forward as absolute requirements enforced politically was a profound betrayal of Jesus."

So if these statements and creeds are written to reflect a world view that is centuries old then what happens when the world view changes? For example the Apostles Creed refers to a heaven up there and a hell down below. Rev Rinny Westra ("Re-laying the foundations") points out that "if we are to take the creeds and fundamental doctrines literally we have to suspend our twenty-first century critical faculties. If faith is about foisting a set of beliefs formulated almost two

centuries ago on twenty-first century people then in the long run that faith is doomed.” Perhaps that should be in the short run?

Another aspect of the interpretation of statements of belief and creeds that concerns me is the way the Presbyterian Church (and its not alone in this) has passed rules that exclude people.

As an example of this, why did it take until 1965 before the first woman was ordained in the Presbyterian Church? Why is it that just four women have been moderator of the Presbyterian Church? Recent rulings of the General Assembly with regard to church office bearers seem to me to be a supreme example of exclusion based on a set of beliefs from another time and place.

To quote the PCANZ book of order: “In accordance with the supreme and subordinate standards of the Church and with previous Assembly decisions, session, parish councils, presbyteries, and district councils shall not accept for training, license, ordain, or induct anyone involved in a sexual relationship outside of faithful marriage between a man and a woman.”

In what way does this rule fulfil the message of John (4:18b) that “God is Love”? Is it time for parishes to listen to the Easter and Pentecost message that Jesus lives on in the God-love of people, all people? How can a rule that excludes people, that goes against the very grain of Jesus’ life, his message, be acceptable? The idea of challenging that rule requires more time than we have this morning!

When I contemplate the message of Pentecost, we can acknowledge all harm done by religion but also reflect on all the good that has been achieved, not just by Christianity but by many religions. The scientific method grew out of Judaism and Christianity. So did education, medicine, charitable work and justice. Where we have stuck by the rules we have not done very well, where we have listened to the words of Jesus so we have done good.

Here in this parish we see many examples of God-love in action – people who look after people, all people, whether they come to services or not. Their actions and words convey messages of neighbourly love to those that need support, enacting out the mission of the church “love thy neighbour”.

Its not easy and, like Rinny Westra, I consider myself to be on a journey, a pilgrim, one person among many trying to make sense of life. There are other aspects of life that are like religions - capitalism for example, but they don’t include the Easter and Pentecost message that we must love one-another just as Jesus loved us. It is our mission to live out that love so that others may see the God-love in us.

Kerry Marshall