

Sermon – Whit Sunday 11 May 2008

Acts 2. vv 1 – 21

John 7 vv 37 – 39

Why, why, why, why and for good measure, how? These are questions I asked myself over and over again while preparing this talk (and yes, it was prepared!). Today is Whit Sunday, or Whitsun – so what? So what indeed you may well ask?

The subject I want to discuss is what is Whitsun and what, if anything, is its relevance to us today? Is Whitsun important and why should we mark it? What, for example, if it was stopped? What would be lost?

On this last point, in most people's minds it has gone – following the intense secularisation of our society today, and the creation of the two spring bank holidays with the removal of Whit Monday as a public holiday.

Let's look at some facts:

- Whitsun is also known as Pentecost
- It happens ten days after Ascension Day
- Ascension day comes forty days after Easter
- The Holy Spirit came down one Pentecost

And now we have a few facts, are we really any wiser. (I'm sure there are many of us regular churchgoers who needed reminding of these.) But do we really understand? And that's why I kept asking why, why, why and how? Answers to these questions bring about understanding.

Let us go to the Bible and our two readings from this morning for help. The reading from Acts describes how the Disciples were present at the Jewish festival of Pentecost, along with a huge gathering of men from a very wide region about – all with their own languages, and spoken to by a man from Galilee. It must have been a bit like an EU convention, with the disciples say, being from the Czech Republic.

But it must have been quite an occasion, for this was an important festival as it marked the 50 day period after the law was brought down from Mt Sinai. Everyone there would have been Jews with a strong faith and well educated in the books that we recognise as generally making up the Old Testament. The arrival of the Holy Spirit was very graphically described, as a violent wind that filled the whole house. Those who have had experiences of being visited by the Holy Spirit report similar feelings of its strength. Moreover, those present were amazed that they could understand all the other languages. It must have been a bit like being at our EU convention, and suddenly the words of the EU Constitution becoming crystal clear! And then we are told the Peter addresses the crowd repeating the words of the Prophet Joel.

And this is where I have trouble with the Lexicon readings as we are left high and dry, and the most important part of the story is missing! But then, maybe this is an aid to the preacher in that it gives him something to expand into! Now read on... What could be clearer; Peter goes on in the next verse: "men of Israel, listen to this..." You know something important is about to come.

Peter goes on to describe how Christ was put to death by crucifixion, but God raised him from the dead... because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. He then repeats the words of David, who was so revered by the Jews, concluding with v36

“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

His message and his preaching must have been extremely strong, as we are told it led to the conversion and baptism of about 3,000 people - you might draw parallels with a Billy Graham crusade. Moreover those present would have been well versed in Jewish law, and hence the strength of the logic presented by Peter must have been equally clear.

The Disciples had been primed by Jesus, as we heard from the reading from John’s Gospel. They realised what was happening, and the proximity to Christ’s ascension just ten days earlier, would have reinforced this. Put yourself in the disciples’ position and think how you would feel.

The name Pentecost is from the Greek and signifies the fifty day period, originally since the giving and receipt of the law, and now conveniently, fifty days, or seven weeks after Easter. But most significantly here, it truly is the day on which the Christian church was born, and hence its birthday. This was the day the Holy Spirit came down, and the new group of Apostles, prepared by Jesus to spread His message, made their first very significant, and substantial conversions as followers of Christ. This is so important as it is both the beginning and end of Jesus’ appearance on earth. It concludes Jesus’ coming with the appearance of the Holy Spirit and the signal to the Apostles to go out, preach and convert. And it is the beginning of the Christian church, our church.

So why do we make so little of it today? It’s the church’s birthday and we should be out celebrating – having a feast! Indeed the early church did, and this was the day when the church welcomed its new members, who would wear white for the occasion and hence the Anglo-Saxon name, White Sunday. I still clearly remember Catholic children all dressed in white going to their first communion on Whitsun.

And now returning to my topic, what is the relevance of all this to the church today?

For decades church attendances have been falling, though this has stabilised thanks to new generations of priests – new blood - and the impact of Alpha courses. But for many there’s no fun in church. The Christian church is seen as riven with conflict, schism, using remote language, introspective, fogeyish and destroying itself with sexual malpractice and the political posturing that goes with it.

These are perceptions, and much is being done at last to reverse these - but many won’t go away. But best of all, change is coming at ground level and perhaps none stronger than Alpha where people share a meal and talk in everyday accessible language.

I was told the story recently of a priest who took his congregation into a betting shop, keeping them there for about ten minutes. They couldn’t wait to get out. Hardly surprisingly, they felt threatened and couldn’t understand a word of what was going on. The point was only too clear. To many people today going into church for the first time, this is the experience they are met with. We have to speak in clear everyday language.

Now let’s look at ourselves here in church. How many of you, when you first came to Aldham, just walked into our church here for your first service? And how many of you were invited? Similarly when you consciously went to church for the very first time, how many of you then were invited in? Yes, most of us I suspect.

There many barriers to people coming into church. Let’s look at them:

Barriers to church going:

- Society
- Language
- Age
- Self confidence
- Best buy / Confusion
- Religion is private

We need to break through. Use the occasion of future Whitsuns to breakthrough these Barriers.

People still today have a great need to find a real meaning for their existence – despite the increasingly secular society we live in; despite the poor press the church often gets and despite peer pressure. These are not poor people down on their luck, though they too are there; they are often well educated, bright and very busy people – active bodies, active brains.

Let's look for these people and invite them into our church. Hold their hands if need be. We're great here – we do a lot to make visitors welcome – but we must remember that they, like us going into a bookies, will be apprehensive.

They won't be filled with the Holy Spirit straightaway as at the first Pentecost for the Christian church, but it will certainly come with time.

The Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Cormack Murphy-O'Connor was reported this week talking on the spiritual homelessness of the Church today. This is terrible – especially at the great event of Whitsun, and all it stands for. Whitsun is our church's birthday, we should celebrate the occasion, the great visitation of the Holy Spirit, the huge conversion that followed. We should party, and invite everyone to the party – and then into our church. Remember how you feel if there is a big party going on, and you haven't been invited.

And this is why Whitsun is possibly even more relevant both for the church and for mankind today. We, all of us, have our role to play.