

Sunday 24th May 2015 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		DAY OF PENTECOST – Year B Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Ascension to Pentecost)	
Ezekiel 37:1-14	Ps 104:24-36	Acts 2:1-21	
		John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15	

Today is the Day of Pentecost, the day on which the Holy Spirit was poured out on those first disciples. It was the day they received the power of God for worship, witness and service.

Pentecost is also the final day in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which we observe each year, from Ascension to Pentecost. Churches in the Dutch Reformed tradition use this time to have a annual week of renewal – “Pinksterfees”.

The liturgical colour for Pentecost is red, which symbolises the fire of the Holy Spirit. And with Africa Day tomorrow, I am glad to see that we have some traditional and national dress here!

The Day of Pentecost

Pentecost is known as the birthday of the church, when those first disciples were transformed from a frightened, timid bunch into a courageous group of people who spoke boldly about Jesus Christ. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the beginning of the large-scale spread of the Gospel. Acts 2:41 (our 2nd reading) records that after Peter had spoken to the crowd, after he had been filled with the Spirit, some 3000 people were baptised.

Jesus promised to send the Counselor, the Spirit of Truth:

“I am telling you the truth: it is better for you that I go away, because if I do not go, the Helper [the Advocate] will not come to you. But if I do go away, then I will send him to you.” (Jn 16:7) (GNB)

“When the Spirit comes, who reveals the truth about God, he will lead you into all the truth.” (Jn 16:13a) (GNB).

The Day of Pentecost was the fulfilment of this promise.

The Day of Pentecost comes after the great events of Good Friday and Easter, when we reflect deeply on the suffering and death of the Lord, and his resurrection, his victory over sin and evil and death. We are people of the cross; we are people of the resurrection.

Pentecost says to us that we are also people of the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that gives us power for worship, witness and service.

Our readings

Our readings paint the picture of that day in the life of the church. But they also point us to the ongoing work of the Spirit in our lives, and in our world, today.

The key text is the story of the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21). The disciples were “gathered together in one place” when there was a rushing wind, tongues of fire and flame rested upon them; they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and began speaking in other languages “as the Spirit gave them ability.” Then comes the bewilderment of those who heard them – the many nations represented there – and the questions – are these men drunk? This is followed by Peter’s response and first sermon, explaining what was happening, and giving testimony to Jesus who had been crucified and risen; and showing from Old Testament prophecies that what was happening had been foretold – that the Spirit of God would be poured out on all flesh.

The rest of the book of Acts is a quite remarkable story of the Spirit of God at work in great power and acts of wonder, through those first disciples. Many people came to belief and trust in Jesus Christ; the church grew in large numbers, and spread rapidly. People were healed. Lives were transformed and changed by the power and love of

God. And a new community of believers came into existence, consisting not only of Jews, but also of Greeks, and Romans, and people of different languages, different communities, different backgrounds. The early church became known for its diversity, its love, its care for the weak and the helpless, its allegiance to Jesus Christ.

We also see, in our readings, that the Holy Spirit was not simply a New Testament invention. **Psalm 104:26-36** – speaks of the work of God in creation - , “when you send forth your spirit they are created: and you renew the face of the earth” (104:32) - the spirit that is breathed out on us all, pointing back to the Spirit of God that hovered over the waters of creation (Gen 1:1)

Ezekiel 37:1-14 is a picture of the valley of dry bones, bones that are brought to life as the Spirit is poured out on them. The dry bones were for Ezekiel the whole people of Israel; they can represent for us our own lives, our church, our community – our longing for renewal and strength and courage and hope, a picture of transformation in its deepest sense – being transformed from death to life.

Our life today

And the life of the church continues to be empowered by the Spirit in us and through us. At the start of every act of worship, at the start of every meeting, we invite the Spirit. “Come, Holy Spirit of God. Move upon us, move in us and through us. Use us as your instruments, as channels for your love and power. May your will be done through us and amongst us.”

Again and again, in our life of worship and witness and service, we ask the Spirit to move in us. One of the most special ministries that a priest exercises is that of unction, the laying on of hands with prayer and anointing of those who are ill, or at the point of death. “I anoint you with oil in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. May our heavenly Father make you whole in body and mind, *and grant you the inward*

anointing of his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of strength and joy and peace.” (AAPB pg 506, # 46). And again and again I see how, no matter how ill the person is, they are uplifted and strengthened and blessed when we do this. The Spirit comes when we ask.

On this Day of Pentecost let us open ourselves once again to the power of the Spirit, to move in us and through us, to assure us that we are sons and daughters of God; let us ask the Spirit to draw us deeper into the love of God; let us invite the Spirit of God to fill us with power and courage and wisdom, let us call on the Spirit of God to give us the gifts we need for ministry, for service.

What do we hope for, as we ask the Spirit of God to fill us, to move in us? What are the dry bones that we long to see come to life?

One example is our community, our country, and the debates and calls for transformation. We hear it often in racial terms – that whites, especially white males, should move aside, that racial quotas should be enforced in sport, in the work place, that there should be transformation of land ownership and the control of the economy. The name change debate at Rhodes University, and the issue of statues, are symbols of this.

My prayer is that the dry bones will come to life as we embrace a picture of a truly transformed community: a community where everyone is of value, a community where everyone has something to offer, a community where the skills of all are put to use; a community in which we embrace diversity and can live with difference; a community where there is no unemployment, no poverty, no abuse of the weak, a community where women and children are safe, a community where school children can walk home without being molested or raped. That will be transformation. The dry bones will have come to life.

As we open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit in us, the Spirit will flow like streams of living water in us and through us, to heal us and to transform us.

What is your valley of dry bones? It might be your place of work, your family, your neighbourhood, people around you: the dry bones of conflict or disagreement, the dry bones of broken relationships. It might be the dry bones of disappointment, the end of a dream, closed doors, missed opportunities, a bleak future, an exam or test where you came seriously unstuck. A rejection letter in the face of your hopes for that bursary, that job. Your dry bones might be those of loneliness and disappointment. Your dry bones might be your struggles to pray, your struggles to find God in times of darkness. Your longing for God.

“As a deer longs for the running brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul is thirsty for God, thirsty for the living God...” (Ps 42:1-2)

“O God, you are my God... my soul thirsts for you... as a dry and thirsty land where there is no water...” (Ps 63:1-2)

Today, Pentecost, is the reminder to you and me that God comes in the power of the Holy Spirit into our valley of dry bones, to transform, to renew, to bring life. We offer to God our own longing, our desolation, our dry bones, our thirst for God.

With Africa Day tomorrow, we pray for all countries, all the people, of Africa.

CONCLUSION

Come Holy Spirit of God; move amongst us; move in us, move through us – send us out into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit to live and work to the praise and glory of God.