

## **Sunday 4 June 2006: An Ecumenical Celebration of Pentecost**

**“You shall be my people...”**

**Readings: Ezekiel 36:24-28; Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23**

*A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you. You shall be my people, and I will be your God.*

A couple of weeks ago, I was playing football in the park with my nephew. At one point, Jonathan, who's aged 7, stumbled, collapsed theatrically to the ground, grabbed his foot and yelled “Oh my metatarsal!”.

The World Cup is nearly upon us, and in the next few weeks, for many at least, what it means to be English, or Brazilian or German will be defined by exploits on the football field and by the fragility or otherwise of their heroes' metatarsals. As a Welsh exile, and at the risk of being lynched, I have to confess that my nightmare scenario is of England actually winning the thing, and unlikely though it is, I am beginning to devise plans to creep away from here at the dead of night, and be safely back across Offa's Dyke before anyone notices I've gone!

Sport is one of the few ways in which we publicly assert our national identity and when we say with confidence what it means to us to be the people of England, Wales or to whichever flag we pledge our allegiance. A game of football is, in theory, a controlled arena in which for 90 minutes we know exactly who the enemy is, and therefore can define ourselves in opposition. Sadly for some, it's far from controlled and the passions aroused spill over into prejudice, bigotry and racist thuggery with seriously violent and damaging consequences for individuals and communities. But recognising that and then putting it to one side, it's the way in which allegiance to our national or local side allows us to define our identity in opposition to others which interests me.

Followers of all religions, Christianity among them, are no strangers to defining our identity in opposition to another group. I've heard the story told in various guises of the man on the desert island who, when he was discovered years after being shipwrecked, proudly showed his rescuers around all the places he'd constructed – including two churches. Why two churches? they asked. “That,” he said, pointing to the first “is the one I go to, while that, he said, pointing to the other, “is the one I'd never go to”. Having laughed rather nervously at that story when I heard it first, it came as something of a relief to hear a Jewish rabbi tell the same story substituting synagogue for church. It's often easier to define ourselves as being “not something else” than it is to say with confidence who we are. And as Christians together here in Westminster in the heart of a city where the language of faith is increasingly unfamiliar to many, there's a strong temptation to baton down the hatches and define ourselves largely, or perhaps even solely, in opposition to the apparently hostile values of the world around us.

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The people to whom the prophet Ezekiel addressed his words were also struggling to find their identity in a hostile environment. Far from their homeland in exile in Babylon, they had heard the same prophet describe a scene in which it seemed their very heart had been removed from them. In the early chapters of his book, Ezekiel had told of the glory of God leaving

from the holy temple and the holy city of Jerusalem, lifting its wings and departing from that place. The temple, the city was left deserted not just by the people but apparently by God himself symbolised that loss of identity that struggle with the apparent absence of God in a strange land. With neither the familiar place nor the familiar ritual of worship to give shape and meaning to their lives as the people of God, the people of Israel were left bereft and bewildered.

But now as the time of their exile draws to an end, Ezekiel points them to a new understanding of what it means for them to be the people of God. They could not just return to what was before. For all that the symbols of the Temple and the Holy City had stood for, the years leading up to the exile had been marked by the peoples' faithlessness and turning away from the ways of God. The prophet Ezekiel paints a new picture of the holiness of God being written on the very hearts of the people; of this people of God being marked by the spirit of holiness and so being enabled to live in the land to which they would be sent on their return. To me the picture painted by Ezekiel gives a strong sense of a corporate identity as God's people that is to be lived, not in opposition to or in isolation from the situation or the people with whom they found themselves, but in the give and take, joy and sorrow, order and confusion that is daily life. There is a sense of release, not just in the end of exile, but in the people of God finding their identity as a new people, a people of a new heart and a new spirit, newly equipped but now being sent out to face familiar challenges.

Today, the Feast of Pentecost, is sometimes called the birthday of the church. I have to admit to not being too keen on that description, because somehow it seems to lose something of the sense of history on which we build, on the common experience of a people of God, through the ages. For when we look at the other readings we heard today, there is a strong sense of continuity, with the experience of the people of Israel and the words of Ezekiel.

For the disciples, gathered in Jerusalem, the gifts of the new spirit and the new hearts manifested themselves in the multitude of languages with which they spoke to a crowd of many nationalities, cultures, understandings as describe in the book of Acts. In John's Gospel, the gift of the spirit is given to the disciples by the risen Jesus, still marked with the wounds of crucifixion. He sends them out into the world in his name, with their new spirit prompting them to learn what it means to be a community of both repentance and forgiveness; with their new hearts marked by their encounter with a wounded, crucified and risen Saviour. If the feast of Pentecost and the gift of the Spirit is indeed about finding our identity as God's people, then in all of these scriptural passages, there is for me something of a sense of a breaking down of barriers rather than a building up of walls.

At the end of this celebration of Pentecost, this celebration of being blessed by the Spirit and being called as the people of God, we will quite literally go outside carrying with us the flame of the Spirit symbolically passed on to us from the candle that represents the risen Christ. We'll go out, as the words of the liturgy will remind us, into the wild places of the world – (we'll be overlooking Trafalgar Square which can be pretty wild at times).

As we go out we'll carry with this the knowledge, that as generations before us have found, the Spirit equips us to find our identity not as those separated from the world but through our passionate engagement in the world. The Spirit which equips us to be God's people will not allow us to be satisfied with the easy comfort of tradition or the surface attraction of self-defined truths and careless relativism. Our sending out by the Spirit will not allow us to stay in one place for too long but prompts us to new discovery and creative risk-taking. It urges to speak and act with confidence in the distinctive truth revealed in Jesus Christ, yet open our eyes to the discovery that God is there before us and refines our confidence with a humble

openness to the truth which others have discerned. It demands that our engagement with the world to which we are sent balances words, action, silence and a passion for the truth, with the wisdom to recognise that truth in the words, action and silence of those whose experience differs from our own. The God of truth gives us new hearts and a new spirit not to become a people of our own defining but a people that is open to the presence of the living God, can recognise and name that presence and so be equipped to live each day as God's people in the world.

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