

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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EXODUS AND PENTECOST

20th May 2018

Exodus 18:13-24

Acts 2:1-13

On this the day of Pentecost, it is obvious why we read about the giving of the Holy Spirit to the disciples in dramatic form. It might not be quite so obvious why we read about Moses getting advice from his father in law! But there is a connection and we will get there.

Pentecost is celebrated as the day that the Holy Spirit was manifested among the disciples – the Spirit had already been given by Jesus in his resurrection, when he breathed on his disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit”, but the presence of God’s Spirit was not made manifest, made obvious, until the day of Pentecost. But Pentecost is also and equally celebrated as the birthday of the church. Before Pentecost there was not a church, there was just a group of people who knew or had known Jesus. But there was no common vision or goal, nothing that they worked together towards. There was no purpose in the group and so there was no church.

When Jesus was with his disciples, they listened to him, they went where he went, they were told what to do by him. But what would they do without their leader? When a movement is focussed entirely around its founder or its leader, then there is always a vacuum when that leader leaves, and that vacuum can have devastating results. Indeed, the longevity or otherwise of an organisation is usually determined by the way that it gets over the loss of its founder or of a charismatic leader. Jesus was both. He had gone back to be with his heavenly Father, and what were his followers to do now? Who would tell them what to do? Who would lead them? They waited, as he had told them, in Jerusalem, and they must have wondered how long they would have to wait, and perhaps they might have had doubts in their mind that anything at all would happen. Maybe some of them had privately begun to make a mental timetable “If we are no further forward in two weeks, or in a month, I will have to get on with life as best I can.” That sort of thing.

And then on the day of Pentecost what happened was not that a new leader arose, although at the end of the day Peter was fulfilling the role of spokesperson. No, what happened was that God anointed all of them, gave all of them the ability and the desire and so the commission to tell of his deeds of power in Jesus. Over time the Church would have leaders who emerged, people like Peter, like Philip, like Paul, but the most important thing that happened was that they found what they were for. They were to carry on the work of Jesus in bringing in the kingdom of God in word and deed. And in that task, the responsibility and the ability for taking the Gospel out to the world was given to everyone. Everyone in that room was given the gift of telling people in ways that they could understand. And as the church grew and spread, which we can read about in the rest of the book of Acts, the experience of Christians was that everyone was given gifts which were used to show or tell the good news.

This gift of speaking un-learned languages seems to be a one off – this is different from the gift of ecstatic praise which is mentioned elsewhere. Over time it was seen that some people were given leadership gifts, others were teachers, some were good at organising, or at showing God's love in hospitality or in healing or in prayer. But the joy of taking the good news, and the responsibility was given to all, not just to one leader, or even a group of the elite.

In the same way that Jesus had led his disciples, Moses was *the* leader of the Israelites in their desert wanderings. Earlier, when he went before Pharaoh, Aaron had helped him and spoken for him, but by now he was used to leading, to being in charge, to telling people what to do. By now he had led through the sea of reeds (we will come back to that next week) and through hunger and thirst. He had been the one they complained to, whether about lack of food or water, or in fear of Pharaoh, or when they had grievances with one another.

Moses was always on call.

It took Jethro, who was older, who was a foreigner, who was not one of the people but was just visiting, and so was coming from "outside", to see what was happening. Moses was spending a lot of his time dealing with petty controversies, keeping the peace between warring neighbours of families, sorting out the minutiae of people's lives for them. Maybe Moses liked this sense of being in charge. Maybe he hated it. Maybe he thought it was his duty to do it, since, at the burning bush, God had called him. Whatever Moses' feelings and motivations, the pattern was established and so it was hard to change. Just as the leader-less disciples couldn't envisage any other way of being a group than of having Jesus with them telling them what to do, neither Moses nor the people could envisage any other way of arranging their communal life.

And in both cases, the answer was to diversify. The answer was to spread the work and spread the joy! It was to spread the number of points of contact with God, and his doing and his word. Moses listened to Jethro – well done Moses! – and appointed judges under himself. The disciples were gifted by God to go out and share the leadership by getting on with the job of declaring the power of God and continuing Jesus' work of demonstrating the way that God's kingdom was breaking in on the world.

The people, the crowds gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost were amazed that they heard the good news in their own languages. The disciples were probably amazed that they had found, or been given, the impetus to get out there and minister together. And the people whom Moses was leading were probably amazed at this devolving of his power to some of themselves.

Sharing the task was a new start for a new nation.

Sharing the task was a new start for a baby church.

And we, we are seeking a new way forward for our church. On this day of Pentecost, surely, we should pray for God's Spirit to guide us. And surely, we should remember that God prefers to share the task, not load it all onto one or two. If we pray for God's Spirit to lead us, then our forward direction is as likely to come from you as from me. I hope so! We all have a part to play in the church's task of showing the kingdom of God, of being a blessing to others. If, later in the year and as looks increasingly more likely, I am to take on Kingussie church as well as

Laggan and St. Bride's then I will have less time to spend here with you. My days, after all, will still have the same number of hours in them! But you don't need all my time, because God has gifted each one of you.

Not all of us have the same gifts, which is where we differ from what was happening on the day of Pentecost and where we differ from the judges that Moses appointed, but we all have gifts given us by God's Spirit at work within us. The thing about a gift is, you often don't know that you have it until you try to use it. The disciples saw the tongues of fire and heard the sound as of a wind, but they still had to open their mouths and speak. The new judges Moses set up had to attempt simpler cases on their own, and probably those which were over-confident would fail, and the more timid ones might be surprised at their successes.

I have delighted to watch some of you trying new gifts – often with hesitancy at first - but growing in confidence and expertise as you try. I have watched you lead in worship, in Messy church, in Xplorers and Rhyme Time and Bible studies. I have watched - and this has been most obvious in Messy Church – while people who have something they want to talk about have gone, not to me, the scary minister, but to some of you. And you have listened, and you have helped. You have no idea how happy this makes me! I have seen how some of you evince the gift of hospitality in a way which I would find difficult and troubling, and while some of you show administrative skills that we have all learned to depend on. God gives the gifts that we need to be the church, so long as we never forget what we are for. We are not just to exist, but we are to take the good news of God's love to the world, in ways that all can hear and see that news.

If as a church we are not to just stand still, or worse, turn inward and shrink away, but go forward, we should pray for God's Spirit – for all of us – then then, believing in God's leading, we should be willing to think in new ways and try! Amen.

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