



Pentecost
27 May 2012

“There is no “away” to throw our rubbish”

A sermon by Revd Clare Herbert

Readings: Acts 2.1-18; John 15.26-27, 16.4b-13

I have two texts for this morning’s reflection:

**In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.**

And

There is no “away” to throw our rubbish (repeat)

“In the name of God, who creates, redeems and pours out Her Spirit upon us, Amen.”

I want you to look for a moment if you would at the picture on the front of this service sheet. It is in itself this morning’s sermon. An impish, courageous, alert child stands with his arms outstretched to defend trees from destruction – new life standing in the midst of death.

I don’t know about you but I have moments when I feel defeated by the ecology debate which we face today. I feel desperation when I view the pictures in the Hard Rain and Whole Earth Exhibitions around this Church, and when at the Public Evidence Session of the Parliamentary Audit Commission staged here on Monday evening it was said quite clearly that none of the performance indicators towards the control of harmful climate change are headed in the right direction – none – I felt fear and dread. If so many people have tried so hard over the last 20 years since the first Rio summit to effect change, and if besides that I know just how difficult it is to change myself, are we not headed towards a human, animal and indeed geological catastrophe which makes our occasional floods and droughts look a mere trifle?

I imagine that the prophet Joel felt similar desperation and fear when he wrote the prophecy which lies behind Peter’s words in this morning’s lesson from Acts. Joel was writing in the early 4th century BC when many of his people were in exile and a devastating plague of locusts had ravished his own country. Joel warned of a coming “Day of the Lord” in which an advancing army would operate a scorched earth policy as it progressed across the land. He warned of wars and of tumult and darkness in the heavens. Frightened for the wellbeing of his beloved people Joel wrote a forecast of destruction and death, a punishment for most from God, salvation for but a few.

Like the words on the exhibition boards around this church the prophet Joel is not easy reading. He and the words on the boards tell of sin – of human destructiveness and selfishness, of human greed and wilfulness which leads to others’ harm and our own illness, restlessness and lack of peace.

What Peter *does* with this prophecy of destruction from Joel is the same as the small boy does to the issue of deforestation. Peter turns the moment of crisis into an opportunity for the emergence of new life and hope.

How does he do this and how may we, faced with potential environmental disaster, copy him?

First, Peter has watched and waited in turmoil, not knowing what would happen, but alert to the arrival of God's Spirit coming to bring encouragement and judgement in Christ.

A few weeks ago I was on holiday in Berlin and reminded of the importance of this alert watchfulness. With some friends I went one night to find some green spaces outside the city in Grunewaldt and the Wannsee. Walking around the beautiful suburb which surrounds the Wannsee Lake I suddenly bumped into the ghost of Etty Hillesum whom we had studied and come to love in this church this Lent and Holy Week. There she was in my mind leaning over a gate at a large house called the Wannsee Villa where a group of doctors working of course under National Socialism spent a weekend in 1942 constructing what was known as the final solution of the Jewish question. On the board outside the Villa were the chilling words describing that conference and most frightful of all for me how easily the final solution would be able to use the country's "normal administrative systems" without people catching on.

Becoming so close to Etty as I have through her writing and studying her with all of you, then seeing this board, has instilled in me how alert we need to be to see the signs of humanity's destruction being worked out in the world. If we believe in this universe being God's creation – with all the joy and excitement in discovery that gives us for our daily life– and if we believe in humankind made in God's very image we have a duty to watch, learn, be alert to destructive patterns of living which destroy this world and injure God's image in us. As those first disciples waited and watched in bewildered wondering and longing for the fullness of God's purposes to be revealed to them after Jesus' departure from them so we need to learn alert watchfulness and care towards the signs of what is happening around us. As Claire Foster-Gilbert on our own staff has put it – we need our eyes to see there is no away to throw our rubbish, we are responsible for all that we see.

Let us slow down, watch, learn.

Then Peter with the other disciples was ready to receive the outpouring of the Spirit's gifts upon the Church. He does not go off alone to mourn his Lord's death or to rejoice in his new life. He stays with his friends who are the infant Church of Christ and receives the Spirit's visitation of new life, sudden, unmerited, irresistible, gift!

We are enormously gifted in this Church. From the choir's voices and direction, to the leadership in prayer, from the education programme now inviting people from far and wide, to the artistry of the story telling boards which greet us in the Crypt, from the ways our children present and past read at services like this to the swelling life of the Chinese congregations – and that's without all the background care that goes on in the Business, the Church, the Connection – we are enormously gifted, we live Pentecost all the time, we luxuriate in the gifts of God. But now another group is awakening among us, asking us, urging us to open our eyes, to be the Church of St Martin-in-the-Fields together as we respond to this time of crisis which is emerging in God's world. The Environmental Sustainability Task Group of St Martin-in-the-Fields may not have a title which trips easily off the tongue but their work is enormously important, deadly important, it speaks of life and death and of what we may do here, together, to green the world. Let us hear them after this service today, let us sign up to what they are trying to do in our name and for this Church – looking at energy wastage, creating green spaces, recycling refuse, working to become a model building and community of care for our planet.

Watch, be alert, learn, pray.

Sign up in the name of St Martin's downstairs to the policy before you.

Then what of ourselves as individuals?

Gifted by the Spirit's outpouring Peter and each disciple spoke in their own language and for their own people, though understood and celebrated by all.

What am I going to do? What are you going to do?

I am no a scientist, nor do I easily understand graphs. I am no ascetic, more the glutton and winebibber sort, give me too many pictures of suffering and my compassion overflows into a dull pessimism – what can I do? How can I give who I am?

We do this in our own way with whatever gifting the Spirit has given to us alone. I was helped to think this through this week by coming across the acronym FEW – standing for Food, Energy and Water. I am certainly interested in food – I regularly eat too much of it, how can I make my couch-potatoes-self think more about food, its overpackaging and transport? What about the ways animals are bred for food? I would be interested to do something about food even if it is only deciding to buy far less in supermarkets and more in local shops! Then in terms of energy I can turn lights off when I leave the office – can and do. I can walk across the park – can and do. I can plant a small garden at home instead of putting decking down – can and do. And water? Well years ago I was involved in a project called Wells for India – perhaps I could see how that project is going and lend a hand? In other words in a few moments thought only I could see how I can use my personality and my interests to do something about this cause – God can use me and you.

What can you do? We will have some time to think about that over this morning's coffee downstairs and there will be people there to help us.

Today's sermon is an unusual one, it is made by us all, – it is the child on the front cover of your pew sheet – new life bursting to be born in the face of death, it is the event in the hall afterwards looking at sustainability, its being Church together to receive the gifting of God, it is going home to plant the garden, visit the local shop, it is eating dinner, it is thinking what can I do? It's asking God to help us when we seem humanly overcome,

“Love than death itself more strong, therefore give us love.”