

## **Pentecost, 2012**

Religion that takes seriously the role of the Holy Spirit is never a purely cerebral exercise, in which problems and questions are posed by the curious, and answers given by God. There is a place, to be sure, for the catechism, and for a question and answer method of learning the basics of faith. But when answers become rigid, and discussion is not allowed, then we have a problem.

Styles of religion that seek to offer a cast iron explanation, a caste-iron answer, for every question seem to me to be doomed to failure; not least because in doing so they limit the possibilities of God.

Religion of the Spirit, it seems to me, is all about allowing, even promoting, such possibilities; about allowing as conceivable the overthrow of some aspect of the old order where it has grown stale or vicious. It is certainly about making intelligible the incomprehensible, but if the Spirit is at work, then often we are still left asking, as the many-cultured crowd in Jerusalem did, “what does this mean?”

One of the primary things that attracts me to a style of religion that includes symbol and mystery alongside questioning and openness is this very truth – that God works in the doubting moment, the unexplained moment, the confusing moment, the reflective moment; the moment of stillness, the moment of loud noise, the moment of waiting, the moment of distraction. God works, in other words, in the midst of chaos at least as much, perhaps even more than he does in the midst of order.

And that, I think, is one of the keys to understanding Pentecost.

We read the Acts narrative of Pentecost and so often we focus on the miracle that those of so many languages and places can understand the words of the apostles. And yet we pass over a key aspect of the message – even though they understood the words, they did not understand the message: “What does this mean?” they ask.

And so, over 2000 years later, say all of us. If we are honest.

Paul, writing to the Romans, uses language I find quite helpful to understanding what the Spirit is all about. It is visceral language, and absolutely grounded in our humanity. Phrases like “groaning in labour pains” and “sighs too deep for words” take us to the heart of the matter.

The language of the Spirit is not the language of reason, it is the language of emotion, of being in the moment, of painful human process, and pathos-laden response. Hope, patience, interestingly “weakness” – these are the signs of the Spirit at work. This is not the triumphalism of a religion that has all the answers, but the grasping of a religion that has no final answers at all, but must instead look to God, and let God be and do what God wills.

Do not get me wrong. I am not suggesting for one moment that we replace intellectual endeavor with shallow emotional response. Quite the reverse in fact. Properly rigorous Christianity is always open to the possibility of error, the possibility of hostile analysis, the possibility of change. Historically it has always been thus, whether in the celebrated examples of slavery and the place of women in church and society, or more esoteric theological examples like developments in Eucharistic theology, or even contemporary headline examples, as the church grapples with calls to open marriage to include same-sex couple, or the ordination of openly same-sex oriented persons – matters no more controversial, frankly, than the equally divisive question of the re-marriage of divorcees only a few short decades ago.

The church changes, you see, when, driven by the disruptive power of the Spirit, we engage anew with questions that matter, and allow of the possibility of an answer emerging that differs, often marginally, occasionally dramatically, from that which issued forth in past times. Such change can only occur when visceral, emotional response meets intellectual rigour, and, with the Holy Spirit guiding the argument, the one cajoles and persuades the other of the need for reform.

Try to imagine, if you will, a church in which change was never allowed as possible.

It would be a church full of dead people.

Because every one of us – even the most conservative in disposition – differs in our view on any manner of things from, for example, our parents. And as we have changed, so the church has changed with us. The question at every point is, of course, is that change Spirit-led, or tied entirely to human motives? And how do we judge which is which? We find ourselves driven back into the question of discernment, about which I spoke last week.

And as anyone who has engaged in active discernment processes knows, the answer is rarely simple. If, for example, I would say that the Holy Spirit is agitating for gay marriage, another, equally plausible and committed Christian will stand up and say the opposite, with equal conviction. Which of us is right?

Ultimately, the Spirit decides. Sometimes the answer is quickly clear and the church is able to say yay or nay to whether God is calling for a new thing. Sometimes the church must simply follow, playing catch-up with the society in which the Spirit has already found a prophetic voice. And so we follow Paul's advice. We wait, and groan inwardly, while we wait for adoption. The answer will come, and yes it may even be a provisional answer that the Spirit will again turn another way in a future time. But in all things we must ensure that we have open hearts and minds, that we may hear what the Spirit hears, and be guided into all truth.

Opening ourselves to the possibility of change does not, of course, mean saying yes to every whim and fancy of the postmodern age. But being open to the Spirit at work in the church and in the world makes possible a conversation space that allows God to act, and revelation to unfold anew.

- Craig D'Alton