

May 19 2024 - Rev Jo Smith

I've been thinking a lot about our worship this week. Last week we enjoyed a very special service, Largely I think because members of the congregation were brave enough to come and tell their own stories. I've been wondering about our regular worship—whether it's exciting, or powerful, or meaningful enough. Last week clearly impacted people. Why isn't every week like that, do you think? What I've been chewing over these past few days is on the power of our worship to transform us. During Lent we had a sermon series on being a provocative church, a church that makes people ask questions about us. And that's drawn me back to Annie Dillard, who has some wonderful things to say about what we do when we gather to worship God. Here's one of her observations observation:

*“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, making up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies hats and straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and ... draw us out to where we can never return.” Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk, p.40.*

The point she is trying to make with that marvelous image contrasting straw hats with crash helmets, is that the God we worship is unimaginably powerful. God created the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in it. Do we really believe in God's power when we gather in worship.? Sure, we sit down in orderly fashion, stand and/or kneel, sing hymns, listen quietly during the sermon, but how often to we go away, go home, unchanged, unaffected, untouched?

And here we are on Pentecost morning.

As with our yearly Christmas texts and Easter texts, Acts 2:1-21 comes right on schedule. Unlike the disciples, no matter how often we proclaim ourselves to be a Pentecost people; we are never taken by surprise. We know its coming this Sunday and We know what we're getting on Pentecost morning. Peter and the eleven are mistaken for a group of bumbling, drunken Galilean fishermen, who play a little fast and loose with a Joel quote and end up speaking something that sounds like Latin to the Romans, Greek to the Cretans, and Arabic to the Arabians.

That's Pentecost for us Anglicans. No surprises. No windows are broken by gale force winds, no tongues of fire are seen, and none of us (hopefully) will be confused for drunken fishermen. Pentecost, like every other Sunday, will be an orderly affair with red decorations, flowers and a red stole. Our Pentecost will be nothing like the first Pentecost, and friends that might be our loss. Perhaps what was so energising about worship last week was some of the unstructured spirit-driven informality. And trust me it was a work of the spirit. I had been on clergy conference last week and although I had put some things in place I had to trust that it would all work out in the power of the spirit. And it did.

Scripture confronts us with the surprising power of God to act in ways that we can't fathom or predict. For Christians, that unpredictable power of God is often understood to be the working of the Holy Spirit. The very words we translate as Spirit suggest its unpredictability. In Hebrew, the word Ruach is variously translated as wind, or breath, as well as spirit. And in Greek, pneuma—can have the same range of meanings—breath, wind, as well as spirit. So when we think of the Spirit, we should think of it in all of those ways, as a wind that blows in the midst of a storm, as our breath, as we inhale and exhale, and yes as the Spirit of God, moving in us, and moving us on.

Our texts this morning invite us to imagine the power of the Holy Spirit in many ways. We see its power proclaimed by Paul and Jesus; we hear of its power on the First Pentecost, when it came down in tongues of fire on Jesus' disciples gathered together in the upper room, and they began speaking in tongues, behaving so outrageously that bystanders suspected they were drunk on new wine. We could have heard of the spirit's power in another way, for an alternative reading for today comes from Ezekiel 37—the story of the dry bones.

The reading from Acts is **the** story of Pentecost—the rush of a violent wind, a flame suddenly appearing, dividing into tongues of fire, and hovering over each of the disciples' heads. And then the onlookers, that odd, unpronounceable, and to us, unknown, list of regions, provinces, and countries from across the Mediterranean world. And the reactions—hearing the disciples preach in their languages. Confusion, misinterpretation, derision. But then came Peter's defense—they weren't drunk, they were fulfilling words spoken by Joel:

*'In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.  
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.*

From Romans 8, one of the great passages of all of Paul's writings, a brief extract. Unlike Acts, where words flow freely in unknown languages

and people filled with the spirit preach and prophecy, here all of creation groans, inarticulate, awaiting its final transformation. And in that creation we find ourselves often unable to express deepest thoughts. At those moments, Paul writes, the Spirit intervenes, speaking, praying on our behalf, uniting our unspoken thoughts with God.

The gospel offers us another perspective on the Spirit. Again, or still, we are in John's farewell discourse, the lengthy and repetitive set of speeches John puts in Jesus' mouth at the Last Supper. It is one aspect of John's understanding of the Holy Spirit, and the impact of the Holy Spirit's coming on the new community called together by Jesus Christ. What is most remarkable in John's understanding is that the Spirit, the Advocate, is perceived in such open, and undefined terms. For one thing, the very Greek word used is ambiguous, open to a variety of interpretations. Our translation reads Advocate, in the sense of Defense Attorney; but the Greek word can be transliterated as Paraclete, Comforter.

For John, the Spirit's most important work is in the ongoing reflection and reinterpretation of the community. Jesus says that he has still many things to say to his disciples, but that they are not ready to hear them. He tells them that he needs to leave, so the Paraclete, the Spirit may come and guide them into all truth.

These texts present us with diverse ways of interpreting the Holy Spirit. None of them, taken alone fully explains or defines the role of the Spirit in our lives as individuals or as the church. Nor dare we under-emphasize or ignore one of these ways in favor of the others. The wild outpouring of the Spirit, taking our lives and experience in unimagined directions as we see in Acts is no less or more important than the subtle working of the spirit in the innermost depths of our soul that Paul writes about. And John's understanding of the Spirit as Paraclete, as Comforter or Advocate, present among the community of the faithful, helping it to discern how best to be faithful to its call and mission in a changing world; that too is the work of the Spirit.

But perhaps most important to remember is that Annie Dillard was on to something—not in any explicit criticism of what we wear to church or

even of our liturgy or order—but in our lowered expectations. Why shouldn't we expect to be hit on the head by God when we worship? We should expect the Spirit to move, to blow through this space like a mighty wind. We should expect great things to happen. To see the Spirit's work in the world and in our lives, we need to pay attention, both to the possibility of great things happening, and to the little things that happen each day, each second. For Spirit is both wind and breath, blowing us in new directions and toward new places. It is also blowing in us, giving us life, and helping us pray. We need only pay attention, discern, and experience. The Holy Spirit is in us and around us and leading us forward. Thanks be to God