

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Pentecost (31 May)

Acts 2:1-21

About the closest any of us in these 'virus' days are going to get to visiting foreign parts is via today's text! It reads like a "Thomas Cook Tour of the Mediterranean", if only the travel firm existed! In fact, if only 'travel' existed. Locked in as we are, we can only dream of being somewhere as exotic as the countries and places named today.

But the characters in question were not dotted throughout the lands at this time – they were all together, in one place, gathering in the international climate of Jerusalem, a place that was – particularly for people of faith – a focal point, a place of pilgrimage, a "mecca". We gain the impression that they were in the city, going about their business when the sensational explosion of sound recorded in Acts occurred. It was enough to confuse yet fascinate, and it drew them to one point.

That point being the house where the disciples were. The element of drama surrounding this Pentecost story draws us to this one point, one moment, one assembly of folk – and yet also explodes outwards to include 'each and everyone'. The might of this symbolism lay in this action. Here was no random happening, or disparate group of people, or passing phase – here was pure and powerful drama, igniting sensation, and stimulating thought. It swept tirelessly through all who were passing, and it radiated from all who were present.

And its radiation was nuclear! There is no doubt of that, not just because we "know" in our own selves, but because of the power emitted by the text. Reading Acts reveals a crystal-clear message that something catastrophically amazing was happening. Tongues of fire! Hidden depths of language! Radiant force! Great revelation! Choose whichever sensation you like, they are all here in the richness of the author's dramatic recollection of the moment.

In some senses, it had to be portrayed in this way; after all, Jesus had just left a few days' previous; the followers were regrouping, deciding future tactics; the pressure was on: what do we do next? It is up to us. It is our responsibility. If these teachings and ideas that Jesus had taught and shared with us are anything worth, we have to get motivated. Where next? What next?

What indeed. Who can say if they were expecting such a forceful mandate to be imposed upon them? And it is imposed. Right on top of their heads. All of them. No one is exempt. Each is granted substantial power; each no doubt 'saw' the others so moved. All were to be included in the pattern and plan for whatever was to be. A pivotal, life-changing moment. A moment that we continue to experience, in our own individual ways, as God reaches out in order to provoke and encourage our witness. In these 'virus' days, we are looking forward to this renewal that will hopefully come when 'new life' will indeed be re-injected into the faith of our "post-Corona" world, potentially incorporating all that once happened here in Acts. How wonderful to think that no one will be missed off the list,

and that the power of the Spirit will overshadow everything the virus has threatened. God will indeed be as supreme as He clearly is in Acts.

The vividness of that supremacy was underlined by this symbolism of fire. Bizarre, yet strangely attractive, albeit that having your head set on fire is possibly not to be recommended from a health point of view – and most certainly not as a cure for "Coronavirus" (so please do not tell the President!). This vividness portrays the inner depth God's intervention will stretch to in all who are chosen. These disciples had no choice. Fire reigned. The blessing of God reigned. The trigger had been thrown. Here we go!

And go they and 'it' did. It became global. The faith exploded onto a waiting and curious world, as represented by all of Jerusalem's guests. A vast list, so many folk; milling about, reactionary, inquisitive, drawn. The impact of 'fire', as it so often does (who does not like a bonfire?), hypnotising its audience, luring it ever closer. Come, hear these words. Come and hear your mother-tongue. Come, hear this new message. No, we are not drunk – at least, not on wine; but perhaps we are drunk on the zeal of God released by the flames. Come and share in that.

Only nine-o'clock in the morning! I like Peter's assertion that they were not drunk – but what about celebrations the night before? He clearly has not come home from a nightclub at 5.00am! [Ah! Happy days!] I like the rather zany idea that they were, though, partying. They were excited. They were babbling, bouncing, enthused, provoked. No wonder it looked as if the revelries were still in full swing. Artistic licence could take all of this to another plain – what we need to realise is that huge levels of energy were sparked by this invitation from God, energy that we too want in our lives; energy to replace that rather drab and routine way we have of sometimes approaching our faith. When our Church doors re-open, do we really just want to amble in? Plod about putting the urn on? Throw dusty [by then] hymnbooks at everyone? Or do we want to be rocketed into new stimulus by the energising fire of God's Spirit resting upon us? We have promised ourselves a sense of 'resurrection' here at St. Mark's on that first time back, so we need to be 'dressed' for the occasion in the fire of God's determination to reboot the faith. There has to be revolution! Revolution brought by conquering a viral enemy. Revolution that says, "I want to be here."

The people of Jerusalem, irrespective of who they were, had opportunity to be drawn together – they "wanted to be there" – and 'there' was none other than at the core of the Living God. No, this energy is not alcohol-induced – but, yes, it is intoxicating. It is there to be part of – it is there for us. May this year's Pentecost Hope be for such renewal and vitality to rest firmly on all our heads ... when "Corona" allows.

Fr. Ian