

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sermon for Sunday 24th May 11am Service

Acts 2.1-21

Romans 8.22-27

John 15.26-27, 16.4b-15

Methodism, at least in the guises I'm familiar with, doesn't often speak about the Spirit. We sing some great Wesley hymns. And we'll use our Pentecost communion liturgy. But some say - regretfully - that we no longer expect the Spirit to act in the way that it did when the Wesley brother's hearts were strangely warmed and they shared in leading the evangelical revival of the mid-18th century. I'm always suspicious of such regret. It seems to me, to be rooted in the same instinct that allows the first Day of Pentecost alone, to shape our understanding and expectations of the Spirit. The Book of Acts tells us it was a feast for the senses. A sound like the rush of a violent wind filled the house, they saw tongues of fire resting on each of them, and they spoke other, recognisable, languages. It was a powerful impetus for the early church. No wonder they could witness as they did. No wonder there were the miracles and conversions we long for today. No wonder people pray for revival again imagining that it will be like this! And from time to time it is. But I'm not sure this is the best perspective to understand our faith - or our church history from. My problem with the Acts passage, and with the story we tell about Methodism's beginnings, is that they encourage us to focus on our failings rather than to live with the reality of today. Yet if we're willing to look beyond the dizzying events of Luke's story of Pentecost, and embrace a more complex understanding of the Spirit's work, there are many other images of the Spirit in scripture and human experience that offer us powerful resources for living in today's world and church.

It was a rather innocuous comment in one of my commentaries that helped focus the difficulty I have with Pentecost. When Jesus' disciples found themselves separated from him, it said, they responded in a variety of ways. Some found hope in remembering his words. Others felt cheated. Still others withdrew into silence. His absence, whether it was after his death or resurrection, threatened to divide and destroy the fragile community. At the same time 'though, there were signs of Jesus' continued presence, and after the resurrection these were quickly interpreted as the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who'd brooded over the water at creation, animated the dry bones in Ezekiel's prophecy, and inspired the passage Jesus had read from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth. *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... release to captives... recovery of sight to the blind... to let the oppressed go free..."* In today's Gospel, Jesus told the disciples they would not be alone, the Advocate, the Spirit of truth would be sent to them. And Paul's words for a small, vulnerable group of Christians in Rome surely draw on the experience, of the early years of the church. Faced with the struggles of fragile communities to live in a challenging world, Paul and John remind the believers that were - and are - and will be - sent the Spirit - to help us in our weakness. And it's in these readings, rather than the powerful story of Pentecost, that I find an understanding of the Spirit that can help us face the realities of our lives, the church and the world in our time.

I've always loved the passage from Paul's letter to Romans, but we should be aware that what we have is part of a much longer passage, that ends with his assertion that *"all things*

work together for good". Creation's groans aren't simply the cries of human grief and nor are they only negative. Translated more literally than in the version we heard, verse 22 says, "For we know that all creation groans together and is in labour pangs together until now." In other words, all of creation waits together now, for something utterly new. And – we all know – we need it.

This is one of the few passages in the New Testament that insists on us taking the whole of creation seriously. It invites us to reflect on the earth's groaning as soil, water and the atmosphere is poisoned, earth's climate is changed, and forests and wildlife devastated. It offers us a different perspective on the devastation wreaked in on Nepal by two earthquakes and allows us to hear humanity's cries of grief within the wider context of earth's decay and resurrection. As we witness the continuing saga of migrants trying to cross not only the Mediterranean, but the Andaman Sea between Burma, Malaysia and Indonesia, we need to remember they're not only fleeing persecution and war, but also economic poverty and the increasing devastation of their own lands by climate change. Others lives are more affected by local conditions. When IS took Ram-a-di this week more than 40,000 people - a third of the population – fled. Most were on the road to Baghdad, but because the bridge to the capital had been closed, they couldn't be reached. The UN reported that children are dying of dehydration in the heat. As we listen to these cries we're also aware of them within our own communities. This this week I've sat with two people worrying about what the recent election on will mean for people they work with. The austerity cuts of the last government have devastated many lives. And they worry now about what is to come for those who are on disability benefits, job seeker's allowance or help with legal fees in the courts. I think we're seeing a similar groaning in the church in this country too. I don't buy the idea that Christians are persecuted, although accept there may be some truth in us being side-lined by wider society, and some parts of the Church may feel like that now after the yes vote for equal marriage in Ireland. But I do think the reality that we belong to a declining church, is part of the groaning of creation, as is the struggle we have to know how to respond.

In the face of this groaning, Paul says that believers have the "*first-fruits of the Spirit*". What he means is that we know now, what all creation will know, when the end-times come. For the Spirit enables us to know, that the distress experienced now, is part of the renewal of creation. This – and the image of the earth groaning in labour - is challenging though. This is not the gentle breath of the Spirit or even the Spirit brooding over the waters. Birth is not normally an easy process for parents or child. There is a struggle. There is pain. There is sometimes loss and death. There is disruption, an interruption, which may be welcome after the long wait, but is nonetheless life-threatening. And yet there is always transformation. No one comes out of birth the same. There is something new. There are changed relationships, changed perspectives, changed understandings of life and death and more. And these transformations aren't only the result of physical birth. They also result from the other forms of creation and humanity's groaning if we can be open to them. For just as birth pangs, birth pains are the interruption, the disruption that tell women birth is about to happen. So it is possible - if we see them through the eyes of faith – to see all of the events I've talked about this morning – as interruptions, disruptions, that even if they are inarticulate aren't useless groans, but labour pains that invite us and the world to be transformed.

If you've read or heard something of the story of my pituitary cyst, you'll realise I'm speaking of my own experience. And I want to use one of my paintings to explain what I mean. When I paint, I rarely know what it is, until afterwards. I painted this, this winter, and I have wondered about it since. Initially, I saw chaos, the bringing order out of chaos, and something of pain and suffering and glory and silence. Daniel called it "Whirlwind". Donald Eadie said he sensed the blowing of a primal wind and sent me a powerful poem about a willow tree being thrashed by a storm that ends with these words.

*"How should I know
that what a storm can do
is to terrify my roots
and make me new?"* (Brendan Kennedy)



A few days ago, Donald asked me for a copy of the painting, so he could use in his service today. And at last the penny dropped and I see that the primal wind is the Spirit. The spirit disrupts, disturbs, and out of the labour pains, the storm, makes life new. I can say this of myself. And others have written similar things about lives more disrupted than mine. But I do not say it lightly. And nor do I presume to assume it for others. It is a statement of faith that I - and others - have reflected-on and own for ourselves. It should not be imposed on others. But I share it, because I think it is what Paul means when he speaks of how the Spirit helps us in our spiritual poverty – when we groan together with creation - in our fragility, weakness and vulnerability. I think it is notable that Paul doesn't say that the Spirit empowers us. But that *"the Spirit helps us in our weakness [and] intercedes with sighs too deep for words."* God's Spirit shares in the cries and the groaning of humanity and creation and enables us, even as we live with our weakness and vulnerability, to experience the fullness of life that God promises believers - now.

Hold onto this sense of the Spirit helping us in our weakness as we move on to John's Gospel. It was written near the end of the 1st century. War, famine, and persecution had left the Jewish community and early Christians feeling disillusioned, vulnerable and bewildered, but rather than uniting them, it tore them apart. And as the Christians were isolated, and thrown out of the synagogues, their writers emphasised their separation from the world. When Jesus speaks in John's Gospel, he speaks to encourage this fragile, vulnerable community in the life of faith. The Spirit of truth will bridge the distance between the church and the world, expose non-believers to the error of their ways, and enable them to see God's presence in the world. And the Advocate will help Jesus' followers interpret his message for the world's ever-changing situations and proclaim it. What I see here, is a small fragile community, being challenged with the support of the Spirit, to interrupt, to disrupt the world's way of seeing and living. And I think it helps us to understand the Spirit's work in us and see where the Spirit is active now.

All of the events I talked about earlier challenge us, as individuals, churches, and as a community of nations. Wars, earthquakes, illness, famine, persecution, feeling migrants, poverty-stricken nations, face us with the truth of our humanity as well as the fragility of life. How we respond to these situations matters. And it goes without saying, that Christians should be among those seeking practical ways of not only offering aid, but of working to change the root causes. The agreement made between the Malaysian and Indonesian governments, to allow boats drifting in the Andaman Sea to land, came as a great relief this week. Somehow, the truth of the inhumanity being perpetrated hit home in the same way it'd done a few weeks earlier, when the European nations agreed to change the way we respond to the migrant trade across the Mediterranean. The same thing happened in Nepal, where the support local people whose lives were devastated by the earthquake provided for each other, was at least as important as the help offered by governments and aid agencies. I see both as the Spirit of truth, the Advocate, at work. I find it much more difficult to see how the Spirit is at work in Iraq and Syria.

And some say the same of our country too, as the divisions between rich and poor, the haves and the have-nots, insiders and outsiders, appear to increase. I don't have answers to all these big questions. Except that I'm glad to say, that our small church is using its resources to challenge us, through the Public Issues team, with the myths we spin about the poorest amongst us and people's experiences of benefit sanctions. And through our professional social work, and the oases offered by the church to people on the margins, this declining church is offering practical support, for those who lives have been disrupted by creation's groaning.

I have spoken of the Methodist church and our circuit and churches like this, because I want us to see how it's when we recognise our weakness, our spiritual poverty and our vulnerability, that the Spirit is best able to work in and through us. One of the reasons I struggle with John's sharp distinction between the church and the world is that it encourages the church to see itself as superior. Yet as long as we assume we're strong. As long as we are convinced we have what others need for life. And as long as we see ourselves as having nothing to receive, the Spirit will not be able to help us in our weakness, and we will struggle to live and speak truth to the world. When we look back to the early church, dazzled by the power of the story of Pentecost, we forget how fragile the disciples were. When we look to the beginnings of the Methodist movement, amazed by the Wesley brothers' work, we forget that before all this, they struggled with faith. I think that what we need today is an awareness of our fragility and weakness that doesn't separate us from the world. That enables us to be open to the interruptions of God's spirit, to the cries and groaning of God's people, and allows God to disrupt our lives, transform them, and make us new. Today's readings offer us the presence of the Spirit as we face decline, disruption, and creation and humanity's groaning in labour pains. And they invite us to ask some questions that I will finish with. Will we recognise our weakness, our spiritual poverty, our fragility? Will we allow ourselves be disturbed, to have our lives interrupted by the events we find ourselves caught up in, and witness in the wider world? And will we be open to receiving God's promise that through them, God will transform us, and make us new? We can take the risk of saying, yes, because the Spirit will help us in our weakness. Amen.

Sue Keegan von Allmen
24th May 2015