

The Day of Pentecost 2017 (Evensong)

Joel 2: 21 – end; Acts 2: 14 – 21

They say the art of good communication is to tell people what you're going to say, then say it, then tell people what you've said. And if that's right, then it's a lesson that's been well learnt by the compilers of the Church of England's lectionary for tonight. Because we've got all of those features, although admittedly not necessarily in the right order. We've got the prophesy of Joel – I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days I shall pour out my spirit – then we've got Peter in the Acts of the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost quoting that exact passage; and now we've got me talking about it all over again!

But isn't it strange that the Acts of the Apostles has Peter going to such lengths to establish that Pentecost

was a fulfilment of a Jewish prophesy! If we accept that Acts is a piece of propaganda to promote Paul's party line; to assert that emerging Christianity was a brand new world religion rather than schism within Judaism; that asserts the agenda that Christianity is for anybody, whether they have any affinity with the Jewish faith or not, at the expense of historical accuracy; then it is strange that throughout Acts there are sermons that follow the same pattern that Peter's reported speech on the Day of Pentecost does: the fulfilment of the prophesies of the coming of the kingdom is at hand; this coming has taken place through the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus; by virtue of the resurrection, Jesus is exalted at the right hand of God as the head of the new Israel¹.

We could understand it if Luke, writing Acts, was trying to convince good Jewish listeners that the prophesies they had been brought up to love were,

¹ per C.H.Dodd cited in Willimon, William H [1998] Interpretation: John, John Knox Press Louisville.

after all, pointing towards Jesus, so really they're Christian prophecies rather than Jewish ones. We might object, of course, that it would be disrespectful of the Jewish faith to appropriate its prophecies and 'Christian-ise' them. But we could understand that it might suit somebody's purposes. And, in any case, it would diminish prophecies into mere predictions of the future; and be saying "Bingo!" – Jesus is predicted by Joel. But Luke isn't trying to appropriate and 'Christian-ise' the prophecy of Joel. He isn't suggesting that Joel predicts Jesus.

What Luke is saying is that Joel gives us a model, or a type, of what the fulfilment of God's kingdom looks like; that what has happened through Jesus corresponds to that model or type; and that therefore Jesus is the fulfilment of that Kingdom. And just look at what feature consistently runs through that model: the outpouring of God's Spirit when God's Kingdom is at hand is absolutely democratic.

It seems so natural to us to hear that sons and daughters might equally well do something that it passes us by that in just about any other age it would be a radically preposterous suggestion. Of course, our daughters and granddaughters are just as likely to end up qualified as doctors as our sons and grandsons are. But we shouldn't take it for granted. My grandmother's father wouldn't allow her to take up her place at Grammar School because he thought there was no need to educate a girl. The equality we take for granted is newly achieved and still fragile.

In the time of Joel's prophecy, and on the Day of Pentecost, women were items of property, just like slaves. But God's Spirit is for anybody. There's no hierarchy; there's no misogyny; there are no age limits; and there are no property rights and restrictions. We know that God's Kingdom is at hand when people are not infantilised, are not repressed, and are not manipulated or exploited. We also know, of course, that we do see these things again and again

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

and again, be it in the sexual exploitation of vulnerable girls, in the manipulative radicalisation of disaffected young Muslim men, or the denial of life chances through the post-code lottery of education and health care.

That is why we rejoice and celebrate over the potential that the Day of Pentecost proclaims; and we pray
Come Holy Spirit with fervour and longing.

Amen.