**MF15 PENTECOST : God’s spirit Enlivens all Creation**

At the 1988 Lambeth Conference, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, told the story of a young British couple who had gone out on colonial service to Africa. In their first letter home they wrote: *from our house on the hill we look down on a valley filled with dozens of African families, all living in grass thatched-roof huts. Our nearest neighbours are 200 miles away at the next British post.*

This is a Pentecost story, one that asks who are our neighbours, and pushes us to look beyond the established and comfortable parameters of our identity (in this story ‘being British’) to seeing ourselves as part of a much greater community, one that encompasses all of humankind. Those multiple languages the disciples spoke in following the outpouring of God’s Spirit at Pentecost symbolise the Universalising of the Gospel – the Word of God is to go out to all people, all races, all nations.

Let me mention three aspects of Pentecost:

First, the personal: the disciples were fired with the spirit (Acts 2. 2,3) - the pentecostal experience of wind (= pneuma = spirit) and the tongues of fire that came upon them.Knowing the presence and power of the living God is for us all. For some the encounter with God comes in dramatic ways (eg Pentecost, Paul on the Damascus road). *(The story is told of a man who came to an Anglican church service and was waving his arms around and speaking in tongues and generally disrupting the worship. At length an usher came and asked him to desist. And the man said: ‘but I’ve got the spirit’. And the usher replied: ‘that may be so, Sir, but you didn’t get it here’).*

I have not had a Pentecostal experience as described in Acts 2. My experience of God has been a gentle one, like that of Elijah on Mt Horeb (1 Kings 19. 9-15): God was not in the wind, the fire or earthquake, but God was the still small voice that strengthened him and gave him courage to continue. Or think also of the disciples on the Emmaus road (Luke 24. 13-35): it was the slowly dawning realisation that the stranger they were talking to was Jesus, and that renewed life and hope and faith for them. We must be wary of prescribing any normative manner in which the Spirit comes, but be open to God’s spirit in the multiple experiences of life

Second, MOVING OUT beyond our comfort zone. There were major problems as the disciples encountered those many races and languages. They were astonished to find that God’s Spirt was poured out *even on the Gentiles!* The Jerusalem Church was not impressed and said ‘they must be circumcised like us and obey the Law of Moses’. Peter, Paul and Barnabas argued robustly against this, and the rules of the church were modified to become more inclusive and less prescriptive.

James Alison, an English Roman Catholic priest and theologian, commented: *In a very short space of time in Luke’s story-telling we have gone from something rather like ‘You are no part of our narrative’ through ‘You can be part of our narrative, but only on our terms’ to ‘Heavens, we are part of the same narrative, which isn’t the one either of us thought it was and isn’t on the terms set by either of us’.*

Pentecostal faith means being open to difference – different generations, races, faiths, nationalities, churches, or socio-economic deciles. In his 2003 book *The Dignity of Difference,* the then Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes: *The test of faith is whether I can make room for difference. Can I recognise God in someone who is not my image? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his.*

Third, what about all those DEAD BONES in the reading from Ezekiel 37. 1-14? The bones were those of the whole House of Israel, and the two sins that had deadened them were idolatry and injustice. We don’t worship foreign gods in the 21st century, but we do worship the gods of complacency, self-centredness, corporate greed, neo-liberalism and many others. And injustice and inequality are rampant in the western world, and worse when we think of Third World nations. Can the Church and our self-satisfied society live again by being spirit-filled and returning to the paths of the true God?

Pentecostal Christians, then, are those who feel God’s Spirit at work in their own lives, within the Church and all Creation. Michael Mitton has written: *“The Spirit is not a tame bird”. We cannot put chicken-wire around the ecclesiastical coop. The coop may contain the chickens, but not the Holy Spirit of God which blows wild and free, and calls us to join courageously in God’s Mission in all its aspects.*

Let us think deeply on Ezekiel’s words: *God said to the wind: Come and breathe on these dead, and let them live. So I prophesied as he had ordered, and the breath entered into them; they came to life again and stood up on their feet, a great and immense army.*