

# *future calling!*

a sermon preached on the feast of

## *Pentecost Sunday*

15 May 2016

at

### *st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Proverbs 8:22-31, Psalm 97, 1 John 1:1-5, John 20:1-8

We are accustomed to thinking that what we do today determines what we deserve tomorrow and when we die – an imagination fuelled by centuries of works righteousness, both Christian and pre-Christian, regularly reaffirmed at funerals, even supposedly Christian ones. But in fact the Christian frame of reference functions in exactly the opposite direction. It's a case of God's future calling forth being in the present, not the other way around.

The spiritual resurrection body to which St Paul refers<sup>1</sup> is the Divine fulfilment which draws us forwards, like the gravitational pull of a star over its satellites, no matter how broken or failed or incomplete the present may appear to us to be. Jesus' death and resurrection – which has been the focus of these fifty days – is what Christian theology calls an eschatological event, because it is the power of God's future to draw out the present, in spite of all appearances to the contrary.

During last year's Spring Series I spoke about the Christian doctrine of eschatology, as the fundamental orientation of the liturgy. I invoke eschatology today because Pentecost is so misunderstood, because it is all-too-tempting to associate the giving of the Spirit with spectacle, with dazzling signs and wonders, or with a holy huddle in a religious ghetto, or, more commonly, with that magic fairy sword to rescue us from real life. But as Karl Barth reminded us all, all Christian theology is eschatology.

Thus, the Pentecostal experience only makes sense *eschatologically*, as the power of God's future over the present. The giving of the Spirit to the church is the putting on of a spiritual body, the putting on of imperishability, the swallowing up of death, under the influence of God's fulfilment, the eschaton, in the here and now.

The Advocate, the Spirit of truth who will be with us forever, abides in humankind as present tense, as the gift from the future.<sup>2</sup> The giving of the Spirit is the future calling us into death and resurrection: this is the meaning of our baptism.

What, then, will be the signs of this baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ by the power of the Spirit? Will the Pentecostal church be known by its numbers or wealth or by what it says it believes or even by the way in which it prays? Surely, Christ's death and resurrection tells us that we will know the Pentecostal church because it will be the community which is *dying and rising here and now*, putting on imperishability every time it dies to self. When Paul says that what we sow does not come to life unless it dies he is saying nothing more than what Jesus declared. He is certainly not imagining the moment when blood ceases to course through veins. Rather, he is imagining the eschatological fulfilment of God's creative impulse as it is manifesting itself in you and I *in the present moment*. The giving of the Holy Spirit is the gift of the future that enables us to die and rise *now!* Becoming heirs with Christ by the power of the eternal Spirit is not a post-mortem experience!<sup>3</sup> As heirs, in our dying and rising we will do greater works even than Christ!<sup>4</sup>

We will recognise the Pentecostal church because, following its Teacher, it will be dying to all rivalry and competition, all violence, vengeance and scapegoating, all fear and anxiety. The Pentecostal church will obviously not be fixated on money, numbers, power or influence. The glossolalia of those who tumbled out onto the Jerusalem street were the voices of the eschaton calling them in that present moment to articulate God's future to

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:35ff

<sup>2</sup> John 14:16,17

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:17

<sup>4</sup> John 14:12

all the nations gathered in Jerusalem, and ultimately in all the earth. The proof of their being filled with the Spirit was their dying to everything they had imagined God and themselves to be. They were betrayers, after all, not heroes! They were putting on an imperishable body to the extent that they were manifesting Christ's death and resurrection in the present moment.

By baptism into Christ's death and resurrection we, too, are responding to the power of God's future over the present – in spite of how incomplete or unsatisfactory or damaged the present may appear to us to be. The Pentecostal experience is the power of God's eschaton, God's fulfilment, over this present moment. For each of us the spiritual body, an imperishable body, is being drawn forth from us from out of God's future – which requires of us a dying and rising in the present moment. The power of the Holy Spirit is that power which enables us to die in the present moment to something which we would rather not – a self-perception, our precious reputations, a childhood grief, an unforgiveness, possessions, rivalry, vengeance, fear – and any number of other possibilities, that which must die and rise being unique to each of us, each 'hearing in our own language'.<sup>5</sup>

And in addition to whatever you and I are being called to die to personally, there will also be a call to a *communal*, collective dying – as parish community, as nation, globally even. What is it that we are in the grip of, which God's future is calling us to die to, that we may rise?

What is it that must die and rise in you and me, in us, here and now, in order that God's future may be accomplished in us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in this time, at this place?

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