

new wine
a sermon preached on the
feast of pentecost
20 May 2018
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by father ken hewlett

the lections: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104; Romans 8:22-27; John 15: 26-27, 16:4b-15.

From time to time I have gotten into trouble as a result of some of the sermons I have given in the course of my ministry. Today could be one of those occasion, however as I have not detected a strong Temperance element at St John's I think I will not have a negative reaction to my sermon today as we consider together 'being drunk in the spirit'.

The story of Pentecost presents us with three forceful images of the event. The Spirit is like a rush of violent wind, or the descent of divided tongues of fire, or like being drunk on new wine. The writer of Acts uses the more comfortable metaphors of wind and fire—while the observer seems to be saying that the gift of the spirit is a bit like being in the centre of Melbourne in the early hours of a weekend morning.

Over the years many sermons have been delivered about the way the Spirit resembles fire. It lights a bonfire, comforting campers, warming cold hands and thawing frozen hearts. Fire refines ore, turning the dross into ash and purifying the gold into molten glory. Fire can also blaze out of control, terrifying us in its power and magnificence.

Other preachers have chosen wind as their image of choice, wind, that soft, invisible breeze, whose breath stirs grass and flowers, bringing us scents of the seasons. It can excite us like children in a playground on a windy day, leaving us hard to control, but full of life. It blows away the cobwebs and stirs us to new life. It can be like gales howling in the bush leaving us clinging to any prop so we aren't blown away.

Fire and wind are familiar images, known and comfortable, with just that proper little hint of living dangerously with God. Because we know the themes well, we can cope with the lurking terror of being out of control with God.

Drunkenness, however, is another matter. It brings to mind loosened tongues and unguarded moments, erratic and emotional behaviour, lurking violence and stumbling, fumbling ineptitude. Uncontrolled, falling down inebriation is just the start of the least attractive side of the image. There is the lush, lost to reality, focussed on the next drink, begging in the streets, dozing on seats in public places, shouting at those who stare and sleeping rough, unshaven, dirty and offensive to both eyes and noses.

It is not an easy image, this. How can the Spirit be usefully compared to it—no wonder Peter moves to correct those who mock. And yet, perhaps it is an appropriate if uncomfortable picture of what it might be like to be God inspired. We need to take the risk of exploring what the sneering bystander says. If we stick only to the tried and true, we risk missing the new things that God is continually doing, and we risk bringing people to disbelief.

Being honest we readily admit that the image of new wine and parties and drunkenness are to be found in the scriptures, Old Testament and New Testament alike. Jesus likens his teaching to new wine, bubbling up, bursting inflexible skins, frothing full of life, beyond containment. Being with him is, he says, like being at a wedding banquet where no one can cast and all must rejoice. At Cana in Galilee, John tells us, that Jesus is guest at a wedding party and he steps in to repair a breach in hospitality. He produces wine in abundant, prodigious measure, enough to make the whole gathering stagger. And it isn't just any wine; it is the finest quality, the best. No wonder it is the first revelation of his glory,

harking back as it does, to the last banquet in the prophecy of Isaiah. There the LORD God, Almighty, no less, provides a banquet of finest fare, a feast of rich and well matured wines. When God comes, says the prophet, everything that clings to our lives like death's shroud will be destroyed, and we will party with our creator.

All this suggests that the hostile onlookers weren't far from the mark—being with God, being in the Spirit, is as good as it gets, an enormous party, with bells on. It could be good, this stumbling about under the influence of strong Spirit. Only, we've only taken the warm side of the image—we mustn't forget the difficult side. If we come to the one who invites the thirsty to take a drink, then we will imbibe the Spirit, be under the influence, and that means giving up control.

Those who get drunk on God have no choice but to be unguarded with the Almighty, and with one another. We find ourselves blurting out love, and holy truth, and deep unguarded feelings as we join the Christ-like body. Our acknowledged ineptitude, fortified by the Spirit, becomes the essence of our union. We are pole-axed by love, and slain by our Lord, and fall down drunk on God. And so we become objects of mockery, misunderstood and offensive to onlookers. Our lives both attract and frighten, for our focus is no longer on the things that others hold dear.

This Pentecost, we rejoice in the gift of the Spirit, we gladly seek the gifts that God offers. As we embrace this reality, let us do so in the knowledge that it is a risk we are glad to undertake.