

## **Readings for 31 May 2009, The Day of Pentecost Year B**

Pentecost, which we celebrate today, marks a further transition, from the life of the Fellowship of the Risen Christ to the Fellowship of the Spirit.

Two of the readings for Pentecost appear in all three years of the Lectionary cycle. As we have noticed before, where this happens it is interesting to see the 'fixed' readings in the light of the other readings with which they are coupled in the other years.

### **Either Acts 2: 1-21**

This is the story of the first Day of Pentecost (as far as Christians as concerned). Of course Pentecost was a Jewish festival – in fact a Harvest Festival – and it drew pilgrims for all parts of the known world.

What really happened that day? Can we ever know? Where should our attention be focussed – on the tongues of fire, or on the tongues of the nations? Are we to concentrate on the disciples sudden transformation from timidity to courage, or on their apparent intoxication with 'new wine'?

It is possible to dismiss the affair at Pentecost, seven weeks after the Crucifixion, as a branch of showbiz, with little real significance for the church. Indeed there have been strands of teaching in the wider Christian community in which the public displays of "gifts of the spirit" are limited to the Apostolic age and should not be entertained today.

In this year, B, the OT coupling is with a story of renewed life, energy and hope. A litter of lifeless skeletons becomes a mighty army.

### **Or Ezekiel 37: 1-14**

The prophet Ezekiel preached and taught in exile in Babylon. Spirits were at an all-time low in the community that named itself after Israel/Jacob. Not only were they a nation that no longer counted for anything in the reckoning of geopolitics; they were 'dead men', having no smouldering embers, no spark that could be blown into life. This graphic parable of a heap of bones coming to life is (as so often in the Old Testament) a bold and daring declaration that humanity's lost cause is God's call to arms.

The military metaphor may strike some as a bit odd; surely the sign of the Spirit is the dove of peace. But the OT writers needed some powerful way of representing their convictions about and confidence in God's power and authority. Indeed they named God 'Yahweh Sabaoth', the Lord of armies. We don't have to buy into such imagery in order to make sense of this vision.

### **Psalm 104: 24-34, 35b**

If you are reading this psalm from a source other than NRSV you may find it helpful to know that it runs from the line "O Lord, how manifold are your works". Verse numbers seems to vary from one translation to another.

At first sight this extract from psalm 104 is just a celebration of the wonders of the natural world, and of their creator. But two other themes can be discerned. First, (v31b) the prayer of the psalmist is that Lord may rejoice in all his works. The Creator has a continuing relationship with his Creation, and it is to marked by enjoyment. Second (vv33, 34), study and contemplation of these natural wonders prompts the psalmist to rejoice also, and to praise god.

### **Romans 8: 22-27**

In this passage Paul goes cosmic. The measure of Christ's work on the cross is not, for Paul, limited to making you and me feel good about ourselves. It's not even about filling the church with the power of the Spirit. Paul's vision crosses any and every boundary we can imagine. Nothing less is encompassed here that the fulfilment of the destiny of the entire universe.

It is very easy to quibble about this if we read it as literal truth. If God's purpose in sending his Son was to redeem an utterly insignificant bunch of smart organisms on a minute planet going round a very ordinary star in a very unremarkable galaxy we are bound to wonder what all this stuff is about. Did all these stars and galaxies come into being just so we could admire God's handiwork? Clever stuff indeed, but why? Stuff and nonsense, we might say – and very conceited, overblown stuff and nonsense at that.

But suppose we were to read this from the other end, so to speak: our redemption as individuals, our destiny and purpose as communities, can have no meaning unless we see ourselves as part of a universe with a purpose, a universe rich with meaning. Of course we don't know the half of it! Of course the fraction we do know is infinitesimally small! But somehow our destiny is only part of the vastly bigger picture. We can't make sense of ourselves in isolation – and not just isolation from our fellow human beings, not just isolation from the millions of animal species with which we share our planet, but isolation from the entire cosmos.

This is the kind of idea that makes me reach for a hot towel and strong coffee. How about you?

### **Or the reading from Acts 2**

#### **John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15**

This is a selection of verses from Jesus' last conversation with his friends before he was crucified. The emphasis here is on the gift of the Spirit.

This gift cannot be given while Jesus is still with them. Could it be that otherwise the recipients of the gift wouldn't understand that the gift of the Spirit is to replace the gift of Jesus as 'God's living presence'? 'Emmanuel' God-with-us is now *ruach/pneuma* God-with-us. (*Ruach* is the Hebrew word for the Spirit, while *pneuma* is the Greek word.)

Perhaps the most difficult verses are 8-11, which are written in an enigmatic style that is entirely characteristic of John. It's almost as if John is inviting us to make sense of an optical illusion. But at its heart these verses are an assertion of God's power and authority, just as much as the story of dry bones in Ezekiel 37. When John talks here of 'judgement', we are to think not of a law court, and a judge pronouncing sentence; think rather of a decision-making body like a Board of Directors exercising their experienced judgement. Evidence has to be weighed, for sure. But the evidence does not all point the same way; there are incalculable factors to be fitted in somehow. There are matters of judgement, of evaluation, of balancing probabilities, of resolving conflicting indicators. The world's standards of judgement and evaluation, in this sense, will be shown up as deeply flawed.

This line of reasoning continues into the third paragraph, verses 12-15. John introduces the word 'truth', and again we must read this not as scientific truth, but truth on a different scale. It's not that here is a kind of truth that proves scientific truth wrong (a common error), but that 'all the truth' is multi-dimensional whereas scientific truth is in a sense one-dimensional. The truth of which the Spirit will speak is the Father's truth; it is in that sense that the Spirit really is 'God-with-us'.