

Solemnity of Pentecost 2009 (Year B)

In many ways Pentecost is the most challenging celebration of the Church's year, the one that makes the greatest demands of us. This is because it is all about change and transformation, about surrendering control, and that is something we are very reluctant to do. In our highly developed and sophisticated society we are used to being totally in control: if we are too hot, we turn on the air conditioning; if we are too tired to cook, there is some easy meal available; if it is too dark we turn on the lights; if we are sick we go to the doctor, confident that he will be able to sort it out and make us well again. Less developed societies deal with problems in different ways: if it is too hot, they sit under a tree until it is cool again; if it is too dark they go to bed early and get up when the sun rises, and so on, but we have learnt, through ever more complex technology that we can take control of almost every moment of our lives. This is excellent and admirable, although it does leave us feeling very lost and vulnerable when we find something that is beyond our control. There is no simple answer to preserving our planet, so we are tempted to bury our heads in the sand and hope it will be ok; some natural disasters are unpredictable and uncontrollable, and they leave us feeling very helpless; some illness cannot be mastered, and here again our loss of control proves to be something that disturbs and unsettles us. We are used to being in control of life just enough to make sure that we can do pretty well whatever we want to, whenever we want to. We don't mind change, so long as we are, once again, in control; I don't mind my life changing, so long as I choose what will change, and when.

It is precisely this sense of self-sufficiency that is challenged by the Feast of Pentecost. The apostles were told by Jesus to stay together, and to wait for the gift that he will send them. They do not know what this will involve, and they do not know where it will lead them. So they wait, together. Finally something happens, suddenly and without warning, and within moments they are changed people. They are no longer just a group of largely uneducated people of Israel, they are speaking so many different languages that it seems the whole world has come to Jerusalem, and these men are representatives of every race on earth. These men had gathered together and, with great openness they had given up all control; they had said that their lives were no longer their own and they had made themselves totally available to God, and what wonderful things he was able to do with them.

Change is always threatening, especially when it is change beyond our control. and the apostles must have felt as frightened about it as any of us do. But change is also a sign of vitality and life: animals are alive, and they change with the passage of time; so do plants; so do humans - a quick look in the mirror with an old photo of myself to hand is enough to prove that. Rocks don't change much, they don't get worse but then they don't get better either, and who wants to be a rock? To be always changing is a sign of being alive. At World Youth Day last year Pope Benedict said "To be truly alive is to be transformed from within?" [Vigil with young people, Sydney July 19th 2008]. The challenge of Pentecost is to do something that goes very much against the culture we live in; it means saying 'I do not be in control; I could struggle to be in control all the time, but I do not need that. I certainly don't want some other person taking control of my life, because

people are fallible and liable to sin, but I am happy to give control to God. This is to set out on a great adventure'. As long as we want to keep both hands on the wheel, and to be totally in control of our own lives, we are preventing the Holy Spirit from doing his work.

The Church is at its most unconvincing when people put themselves at the centre of things rather than God. The recent sickening report on events in some schools and orphanages in Ireland run by people who claimed to be Catholic shows just how badly wrong things can go when God is effectively edged out completely. The Church is much more convincing when people say 'I would not choose to do this; I certainly wouldn't choose to do it like this, and it doesn't make a lot of sense to me, but I am sure this is the right thing to do and so I will go with it.' The moment we give up control, live in obedience to God and let him take control, we begin to be changed, changed in ways we cannot predict because, as Jesus told Nicodemus, 'The wind blows where it pleases' (Jn 3.8). Do we dare to do this? Do we dare to let God take control? Pope Benedict invited the young people in Australia to do so. 'Set free the gifts!' he said. 'Let wisdom, courage, awe and reverence be the marks of our greatness'. And this is indeed the way to greatness, because while we can do good things even when we want to stay in control, we can only be great when we surrender it. If we do set free the gifts within us we can be changed, and then we can set about changing the world by building up the kingdom of God. This is always challenging, because it involves undermining, disrupting and exposing all of the greed, lust for power and self-indulgence that mark any human society. But this is always the job of the Church, to disrupt and to needle self-indulgence, to expose its falsehood and its hypocrisy. This will not make us many friends, and we should not be surprised if we are criticised and attacked for doing it; Christian leaders who are fearless in making this challenge can expect exactly the same response as their master, who once said 'Alas for you when everyone speaks well of you! This was the way their ancestors treated the false prophets.' (Lk. 6.26).

Pentecost is the Feast of the birth of the Church; it reminds us that the Church is not like a golf club or a stamp collecting society or a political party - a group of like-minded people who decide to get together to do their thing; the Church is made up of people each of whom has been united to Christ, and so each of whom is united to the rest. The Church is for everybody, the Church is everybody's home, because in the Church everyone is invited to discover their true selves, and to experience life in all its fullness. Where Christians live out this vision, where they gather together to worship, offering to God not just bread and wine but their whole lives, they are setting free the gifts of God's Spirit, which gives them the strength, the wisdom and the hope to live life to the full, life where everything they do, at home, at work, at school, in leisure time, has the power to enrich and transform.

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful;
And kindle in them the fire of your love.