

CW A Pentecost Evensong Holy Trinity Cuckfield 31.v.20 Joel 2.21-32 Acts 2.14-21

Sermon 425 - Gin and the Spirit

Abstract: If we study, work and pray we will improve our chances of achieving the kind of clarity which Peter and his sisters and brothers received at Pentecost.

* Joel 2.21-32

* Acts 2.14-21.

When I was studying for an MA in Systematic Theology at King's College, London, in the third term we each had to choose a theologian off a list and make a presentation about him to the rest of the class; considering how much I paid for the course I thought that was a bit of a cheek! Anyway, because I was blind I was the last to the list and got the most difficult theologian, Karl Rahner. For months I struggled; I even took the tapes of his big book, *Foundations of Christian Faith* to Australia, hardly suitable reading for the beach! I was only weeks away from my teaching session and I was beginning to worry, just a little, and then, one morning, when I had just finished my prayers, the fog cleared and I could suddenly see Rahner as clear and pure as gin: God self-communicates with all humanity. Or, to put it another way on this Day of Pentecost, God's Holy Spirit is not the private property of Christianity.

The exact same process, with the exact same message, but on a massive scale, took place early on the morning of Pentecost. Peter, who had good instincts but was a bit of a muddled thinker, suddenly saw the life of Jesus as clear and pure as gin; and he saw, in the power of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus was not just for Jews but was for all people, all over the world.

Now Peter had not, in the classical sense, done his homework and some hard thinking but he had gone through the whole of the mission of Jesus and the refining fire of death and resurrection following his very personal betrayal of the one he loved. And while we do not have the direct influence of living alongside Jesus, we, concomitantly, will almost certainly not be put through the refining fire of terrible events and a searing liberation, but in our Christian lives we must forge our own kind of experience through Scripture, prayer, contemplation and planned study. We may not experience the utter clarity of Peter at Pentecost but we do know that, with effort, we may achieve a surprising, sudden level of perception. In my life, I have experienced intense moments of numinous experience but none of these has happened without hard labour.

In a world of soft choices and civilised reflection, the words of Joel echoed by Peter about prophesy and visions seem somewhat outlandish. I do not often find myself in agreement with Jean-Jacques Rousseau but on this occasion I have to agree with him that civilising influences can be fatal to proper behaviour; we are civilising ourselves out of spirituality into a purely socially conventional way of thinking about our relationship with God, mediated through the Holy Spirit. I quite deliberately likened the Spirit to gin rather than to water. It's hard stuff and it's strong stuff, and it can be heady.

This is not to say that we should expect anything either spectacular or weird, simply that we must work for our experience. If we put a piece of music on the hi-fi we might like the sound we hear because it chimes with experience we have gathered along the way but it will not generate the same quality and intensity of experience we undergo if we have studied musical form and are moved by the choice of key and the articulation of the players. We might enjoy a dramatic blur if we see a Shakespeare play on television but the quality of the experience will improve if we understand the words that are being said. It takes a trained eye to know the difference between a bad and a good picture. We really cannot expect an adult relationship with God if we confine ourselves to the kind of religious mentality fit for children.

Fortunately for us, we are not limited to getting only as much back as we give. We have a permanently asymmetrical relationship with God where we always get out infinitely more than we put in but, nonetheless, we were created to worship our Creator and that means work, thought, prayer and practise.

Going back to the theologian Karl Rahner, the great thing with God's self-communication, or what we would more conventionally call the power of the Holy Spirit, is that we have to leave ourselves open to in-coming communication; and that means listening to God as well as seeking assistance. Too often we think of prayer as something we do but although that kind of worship is important, prayer must also be what we listen for. After all, in the grand scheme of things, God has much more to say to us than we can have to say to him, not least because we have nothing to say that God does not already know; to that extent, when we pray we are really praying for ourselves.

Summing up, we can see that we live with God in a beneficially one-sided relationship where God does most of the giving and we do most of the taking, where we can count on God's mercy, even when we are pretty grudging in our mercy towards others. Jesus only really asked his followers and his audiences to do two things: to follow him and to forgive each other and we find it difficult even to stick to those.

Some people, the lucky ones, will tell you that this lock-down is the perfect opportunity for study and prayer but many people will find, as I did when I was unemployed for a while, that enforced idleness is actually the worst time to try to do anything serious. Since this began for us eleven weeks ago I have done none of the things I promised myself that I would do: I confess that I have frittered much more than I did in former times; I have lost the rhythm of routine activity and have often failed at the self-generation of energy; so I am warning us not to expect too much of ourselves - no doubt the Spirit will be lenient - but we must not lose the sense that if we stick to our task we will achieve a surprising degree of clarity when we least expect it. On that Pentecost morning Peter must have got up on yet another day of lock-down, not knowing how he and his sisters and brothers would ever be freed; but by the end of the day the world had changed for them just as they had changed the world for all time.