

Pentecost
May 23, 2010
Saint Ann's, Old Lyme

Come, O Holy Spirit, come. Come as the wind and cleanse; come as the fire and burn; convert and consecrate our lives to our great good and your great glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Pentecost is one of those events recorded in Holy Scripture that I really do wish could have been captured on videotape. Because every time I encounter the story, I find myself wondering what really happened.

The accounting we are given in the Book of Acts sounds very muddled and confused, speaking as it does about violent wind, and what looked like fire descending upon the assembled group, and everybody talking - all at once and in many different languages.

Somehow in all that cacophony everybody understood everybody else. And, with what seems like a great grasp of the obvious, the writer of the story informs us that everybody was amazed and astonished. No kidding.

To my ears, the event sounds more than a little bit like Woodstock, in the '60's. And I am sorely tempted to wonder just what it was that all those people were smoking. It really must have been something to behold, and maybe, for those who were there, it was just a little scary. Small wonder that they were amazed and astonished.

But even if we 21st century types yearn for video-tape clarity of what actually happened, there's no denying that something happened, and something very powerful indeed. One thing no one ever says about Pentecost is that it was placid, or serene. Nor does anyone suggest that those amazed and astonished people were complacent about what occurred. Something happened, and while we may not have all the details, some things are clear. It's clear that a large group of people was assembled. It's clear that into the midst of that gathered community was given the gift of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus had promised.

It's clear that the Spirit descended not just on a select few, but on the whole assembly. "All of them," our text reads, "were filled with the Holy Spirit."

It's also clear that the Spirit was no respecter of the dividing walls that we tend to honor. Gifts were poured out on all the people, and poured out in abundance, disregarding, apparently, our normal divisions of language, or age, or gender, or race or social status. And when the day was done, they'd been given all the gifts they needed: the power to be God's witnesses, and the grace to be God's community.

And they'd been given those gifts of the Spirit, so that they might bear the fruits of the Spirit. The most notable fruit was the triumphant progress of the Gospel of Jesus Christ over all the normal barriers of language, age, gender, race and social status.

For all that we might lament what we don't know about that wild and confusing day of Pentecost, we do know quite a lot, don't we? Something else we know is that the essence of Pentecost continues, even now. Now, as then, the gifts of the Spirit are given to us, and given abundantly.

And as Paul told us so eloquently, there are varieties of that same spirit - gifts which are still poured out on all people, still disregarding divisions of language, or age, or gender, or race or social status.

The gift of the Holy Spirit, now as then, wasn't - and isn't - just for a select few. Now, as then, the Spirit descends upon the whole assembly, just as Jesus promised. Now, as then, we too have received power to be God's witnesses, and the grace to be God's community. Now, as then, all the gifts needed are given for us to be the community God would like us to be.

I even suspect that the gifts that are given are one way we are invited to discern just what kind of community God would like us to be - especially in a season of transition, such as Saint Ann's is encountering right now.

There's a wonderful story of a parish in Virginia, as it happens. It's a parish that's located some thirty miles from Washington D. C. In the mid 1970's, the community in which the parish is located was considered ex-urban, and consisted

mainly of what we might call 'starter' houses. Not surprisingly the parish was filled back then with lots of young families. The parish, in its wisdom, 'discerned' that with that particular set of demographics, the gifts then given to the community could best be used to build up a really strong Church School and form a children's choir. They 'discerned' that the community God hoped for in that place and at that time was a community that paid special attention to their young people. And they thrived.

About fifteen years later, this same parish looked around and discovered that the town they had long considered ex-urban, was now very much within commuting range of Washington. All those cute 'starter' homes were now selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars, and the heads of many parishioners had grown noticeably grayer and balding.

In the wake of those discoveries, they 'discerned' (actually, I believe they called it 'long range planning') that the gifts within the community now called for a different kind of ministry - a ministry that had more to do with effective and faithful stewardship of greater financial resources and the challenge of ministry to the aging and the dying and their families. And they thrived.

I am absolutely persuaded, that every community gathered in Christ's name has all the gifts necessary to be the community God wants and calls it to be. I am also persuaded that the gifts within any community are one means for discovering what kind of community God wants in that particular place at that particular time.

The only thing the Church cannot be is placid and complacent. That's clearly not how the Spirit works. But the Spirit does rain upon us - and in such abundance - the gifts we need to be God's witnesses, so that we might bear the fruits of the Spirit with courage and steadiness and joy.

Like those first disciples, we are often bewildered, and astonished and amazed to be bearers of God's Good News. Our God works in very odd ways. I wouldn't leave the Church in my hands. But the fact is that in baptism, we are given the gift of the Spirit so that we don't have to manage things all by ourselves. But what we do have to do is discern the gifts that are here, and claim the gifts that are here, and use the gifts that are here so that we may be the community God hopes we will be

and so that the triumphant progress of the Gospel may continue over all those barriers of language, age, gender, race, and social status.

We probably don't comprehend all that any more than we have a videotape of the Pentecost event. But when the day is done, we too, like those first disciples, have received all the gifts we need: the power to be God's witnesses, and the grace to be God's community. By God's grace, may the Spirit continue to come among us. May it come as wind and fire to convert and consecrate our lives for the good of God's world and the glory of God's name. Amen.

The Rev. Nancy Miller