

PENTECOST

'Stay in the city until you are clothed with the power from on high.' Luke 24.

At the time of his ascension into heaven, Jesus instructed his disciples to stay in Jerusalem until they were clothed with the power from on high. They were to wait until the day of Pentecost - the day when the Pentecostal mantle was to fall upon them to clothe them with the power of the Holy Spirit. Today, on this great festival of the Christian Church we remember the day when this promise was fulfilled. St. Luke describes the event in terms of vivid power symbols - wind & fire - bringing a new confidence and joy. They were so elated by the experience of God amongst them that people around them thought that they were drunk. St. Peter was keen to point out that the pubs were not yet open - so how could they be drunk!

Hence the Christian Church was born. The first event in the life of the Spirit-filled community, was the preaching of St. Peter who 'lifted up his voice and addressed them'. Like all good sermon, Peter's can be summed up in one key sentence - Acts 2:36 - 'For this reason the whole house of Israel can be certain that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.'

It is difficult for us to imagine the shock - the impact - of those words. The ultimate had happened - the Messiah - had come. His own people had rejected him. They had killed their Saviour. They were 'cut to the heart' with guilt. Hence their agonising question - 'What must we do?'. To

which Peter responded 'You must repent and join the church'. Repent - be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins - and receive the Holy Spirit. A new beginning - a new age had dawned - the Christian Church was born.

How did they feel about that? What was their response to Peter's sermon? Some must have turned away thinking that Peter was deluded. Others must have been angry at the arrogance of Peter who, after all, had no theological training. He was just a fisherman. You can imagine them muttering 'Is he suggesting that we, who are God's chosen people, need to repent others were convinced that Peter was right, and had the courage of their convictions which enabled them to offer their lives to Christ. That very day, it says, about three thousand were added to their number.

I'm sure that each one of us can identify with those people who heard Peter proclaim the Gospel on that great day. Some of us find it difficult to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. Some of us might even feel the anger at the suggestion that we need to repent. Others are convinced of the truth of the Gospel and are prepared to nail our colours to the mast. This is how it is, and what is more, this is how it should be. We are human beings - complex, confused, questioning human beings.

As a boy I heard a powerful preacher who asked from the pulpit 'Are you a plusser or a minusser? You must make up your mind today. Well, in my best moments I am a plusser, but not a week goes by without some moments when I feel like a definite minusser. I therefore believe that

the church must welcome plussers and minussers alike. Above all, within the Church there must be honesty. 'Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid:' is a prayer with which we begin the Eucharist. It calls us to be open as God is open. There is no way in for the Holy Spirit if the heart is not open. I know we can't be entirely honest with one another all the time because complete frankness and honesty can sometimes be hurtful. Like the lady who once said to Dr. Johnson, 'Sir, you are drunk'. To which he replied, 'Madam you are ugly - and I'll be sober in the morning.' We must curtail that kind of frankness. But in love and charity and without judging one another, surely in the Christian Church we can be honest to God and to each other.

The Holy Spirit comes to us in our weakness and accepts us as we are - more than that - he loves us as we are. He is the inner Spirit of God, the comforter, the guide. He longs for us. St. John describes Jesus as breathing on the disciples and saying 'Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven.' It is therefore the will of Jesus that we should receive the Holy Spirit - to receive that power from on high which enables us to be a forgiving people as God has forgiven us.

AMEN