

PENTECOST MAY 27<sup>TH</sup> 2012-05-24

ST PETER & ST PAUL

*ALMIGHTY GOD -YOU BREATHE YOUR LIFE INTO ALL THE WORLD -BREATHE AFRESH ON US THAT WE MAY KNOW YOUR GLORY AND PROCLAIM YOUR GOOD NEWS. IN JESUS NAME. AMEN*

IT'S PENTECOST. I'VE HAD A WEEK OF DIAMOND JUBILEE STUFF , CONFIRMATION STUFF, ALL SORTS OF PASTORAL STUFF -SO I LOOKED AT MY BLANK PAGE AND DECIDED TO GO FOR A WALK!

TRUTH WAS I WAS SO CROSS ABOUT THE HOUSE OF BISHOP'S ROLLING OVER IN FAVOUR OF A FEW MEN WHO CONVINCED THEM THAT GOD PERMITS THEM TO BE BIGOTS THAT I NEEDED TO CLEAR MY HEAD! IT'S BEEN THAT SORT OF A WEEK!

HAPPENS IT WAS THE BEST DAY OF THE WEEK AND AFTER A FEW STEPS IN THE LUSH GRASS I GOT MY HEAD TOGETHER AGAIN. THE WHOLE OF CREATION WAS UTTERLY COMMITTED TO PROCLAIMING THE GLORY OF GOD.

IN FACT IT WAS SO SENSATIONALLY, EXTRAVAGANTLY BEAUTIFUL THAT WHEN I RETURNED TO MY DESK I DUG OUT THE APPROPRIATELY TITLED 'THE ASTONISHED HEART' IT'S BY ROBERT FARRAR CAPON- BORN IN 1925 HE IS AN AMERICAN EPISCOPAL PRIEST AND AUTHOR FROM NEW YORK. HE HAS BECOME QUITE A HERO OF MINE BECAUSE OF THE WAY HE TALKS ABOUT GRACE -THE FACT THAT HE IS A FABULOUS COOK AND FOOD WRITER MAKES THE PACKAGE EVEN MORE ALLURING.

ANYWAY THE BOOK IS ALL ABOUT RECLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS FROM THE MESS THAT THE CHURCH HAS MADE OF ITSELF -A MESSAGE I NEED AT THE MOMENT FOR GENERAL ENCOURAGEMENT.

THE WORD 'ASTONISHED' HE TELLS US, APPEARS NO LESS THAN EIGHT TIMES IN THE GOSPELS -AND THEN IN ACTS 6 TIMES MORE AS PEOPLE REACT TO THE MESSAGE OF THE APOSTLES. AND THE DAY WE CELEBRATE TODAY -THE DAY OF PENTECOST IS PERHAPS ONE OF THE MOST ASTONISHING OF ALL.

THE DAY IS CELEBRATED AS THE BIRTHDAY OF THE CHURCH -BUT IN SO MANY WAYS IT IS THE VERY ANTITHESIS OF ANYTHING TO DO WITH INSTITUTION OR EVEN RELIGION.

THE ESSENCE OF SO MANY RELIGIONS IS THAT IT PROMISES THAT, IF IT IS FOLLOWED DILIGENTLY, GOD WILL SMILE ON IT'S PRACTITIONERS. THE GOSPEL ON THE OTHER HAND PROCLAIMS THAT GOD HAS ALREADY SMILED ON THE WHOLE WORLD IN JESUS. THE UTTERLY ASTONISHING THING ON THE DAY OF PENTECOST WAS THAT EXPLOSION OF GOOD NEWS FOR ALL -NOT JUST A FEW SELECT JEWS. PENTECOST WAS THE DAY OF LIBERATION!

EVER SINCE IT WOULD SEEM WE HAVE BEEN WORKING ON PUTTING THE GENIE BACK IN THE BOTTLE. WE HAVE TAKEN A COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS LIVING IN THE FREEDOM OF UNQUALIFIED GRACE AND CONVERTED IT INTO A NAVEL-WATCHING INSTITUTION DEDICATED, INEVITABLY, TO THE PRESERVATION OF IT'S OWN STRUCTURE.

HOW DID WE GET FROM THE MAD, MULTI -LINGUAL CHAOS OF THAT FIRST PENTECOST -WITH PEOPLE SO HIGH ON FREEDOM AND GOOD NEWS THAT YOU'D HAVE THOUGHT THEY WERE DRUNK -TO THE SITUATION IN THE REFORMATION FOR EXAMPLE -WERE EVERY CHURCH FELL IN LOVE WITH THE IDEA OF CONFECTING LONG-WINDED CONFESSIONS OF FAITH -BINDING DOCUMENTS THAT SPELLED OUT IN MIND NUMBING DETAIL THE

CORRECT POSITIONS TO BE HELD ON ALL POINTS AT ISSUE?

PENTECOST SHOUTS A BETTER WAY -THE WHOLE IMAGE -TONGUES OF FLAME -RUSHING WIND -IT ALL POINTS TO THE OPENNESS -INDEED I WOULD DARE TO SAY -THE UNIVERSALITY OF GOD'S GRACE.

'THE LAMB OF GOD HAS NOT TAKEN AWAY THE SINS OF SOME — OF ONLY THE GOOD, OR THE COOPERATIVE, OR THE SELECT FEW WHO CAN MANAGE TO GET THEIR ACT TOGETHER AND DIE AS PERFECT PEACHES. HE HAS TAKEN AWAY THE SINS OF THE WORLD — OF EVERY LAST BEING IN IT — AND HE HAS DROPPED THEM DOWN THE BLACK HOLE OF JESUS' DEATH. ON THE CROSS, HE HAS SHUT UP FOREVER ON THE SUBJECT OF GUILT: "THERE IS THEREFORE NOW NO CONDEMNATION. . . ." ALL HUMAN BEINGS, AT ALL TIMES AND PLACES, ARE HOME FREE WHETHER THEY KNOW IT OR NOT, FEEL IT OR NOT, BELIEVE IT OR NOT.' (CAPON)

SALVATION NEVER WAS AND NEVER CAN BE A TRANSACTION -IT IS A MYSTERY -AND WHAT'S MORE - ALTHOUGH IN SOME WAYS WE LOCATE IT IN THE BIRTH OF CHRIST AT A MOMENT OF INCARNATION -IT IS CLEAR THAT IT IS A MYSTERY THAT HAS BEEN AT WORK SINCE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD. NOT AN INSERTION INTO HISTORY BUT PART OF THE VERY CONSTITUTION OF HISTORY ITSELF.

SO THEN, IN THE SAME WAY AS THE BIRTH OF CHRIST WAS NOT A SUDDEN CHANGE OF TACK BY GOD BUT AN UNFOLDING OF AN ETERNAL TRUTH -JESUS BEING THE VERY BREATH BY WHICH THE WORLD CAME INTO BEING -SO AT PENTECOST WE HAVE A FRESH UNVEILING OF GRACE -AND IT IS GRACE THAT IS FOR US ALL.

JUST IN CASE YOU ARE GETTING WORRIED, I AM IN AN OTHER WAY NOT A UNIVERSALIST AT ALL. 'EVEN THOUGH I CANNOT LOCATE ANYONE'S HELL OUTSIDE THE REALM OF GRACE, GRACE IS FOREVER SOVEREIGN, EVEN IN JESUS'

PARABLES OF JUDGMENT AND NO ONE IS EVER KICKED OUT AT THE END OF THOSE PARABLES WHO WASN'T INCLUDED IN AT THE BEGINNING.' (CAPON) EVEN SO, OF COURSE, WE CAN AND DO ALL CREATE OUR OWN HELLISH MISERY WHEN WE TURN OUR FACE RESOLUTELY AWAY FROM THAT GRACE.

BY SAYING 'YES' TO GOD; TO HIS EXISTENCE, TO HIS LOVE, TO HIS SON JESUS CHRIST. BY SAYING 'YES' OUR EYES ARE OPENED TO THE REALITY THAT THE SPIRIT OF GOD INFUSES EVERY ASPECT OF OUR LIVES. NOT JUST THE WONDERFUL, THE JOYFUL, THE LOVE-FILLED MOMENTS, BUT ALSO WHEN WE ARE IN THE THICK OF IT, WHEN LIFE DEALS ITS TOUGHEST HAND -EVEN THEN THE SPIRIT OF GOD IS THERE. WE DON'T EVER HAVE TO TACKLE THAT STUFF ON OUR OWN.

I HAVE YET TO ENCOUNTER THE PERSON WHO HAS NEVER CAUGHT JUST A GLIMPSE, JUST THE FAINT PERFUME OF GOD AT SOME MOMENT IN THEIR LIVES. IT MAY BE AT THE BIRTH OF A CHILD, OR MAYBE SOME SPECIAL BEAUTIFUL PLACE, OR SOME STRANGE CONFIGURATION OF LIGHT, AND FOR A HEART STOPPING MOMENT GOD PASSES BY.

NOW THIS IS NOT SPOOKY STUFF. I'M NOT TALKING NEW-AGE, TOUCHY-FEELY GOOEY NONSENSE. THIS IS NORMALITY -AND THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD IS. INFUSED WITH THE SPIRIT OF IT'S CREATOR. INFUSED WITH THE SPIRIT OF GOD.

YET THAT'S NOT QUITE THE WHOLE STORY. JESUS PROMISED HIS DISCIPLES THE SPIRIT AS A GIFT. AND THERE IS A SPECIAL WAY IN WHICH WE AS CHRISTIANS EXPERIENCE THE SPIRIT IN OUR LIVES. IT IS ALL PART OF GOD'S GRACE.

ALTHOUGH THE SPIRIT OF GOD IS HERE, AROUND US ALL THE TIME, YET OUR ABILITY TO SEE, TO EXPERIENCE, TO FEEL CLOSE TO GOD IS SMALL AND UNCONFIDENT. WE LONG TO BE CLOSE, WE LONG TO REACH OUT TO GOD...BUT TO BE HONEST WE'RE PRETTY HOPELESS AT IT

MOST OF THE TIME. FOR SOME PEOPLE, AS THEY MATURE IN THEIR FAITH, AS THEY BUILD A DEEPER AND MORE SOLID RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, THIS SENSE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN EVERYTHING, IN THE WHOLE OF THEIR LIVES AND IN THE WORLD AROUND THEM BECOMES STRONG AND CONFIDENT.

BUT MOST OF US ALL TOO EASILY SLIP OUT OF STEP WITH GOD. WE HIDE AWAY IN OUR OWN LIVES -WORRIED ABOUT TODAY AND ABOUT THE FUTURE AND SOMETIMES SHOUTING AT GOD, SOMETIMES PLEADING WITH HIM. NEEDING HIM TO BE MORE CLEAR, MORE IMMEDIATE, MORE PRESENT WITH US.

OUT OF LOVE FOR US, RECOGNISING JUST SUCH A NEED JESUS SENDS US THIS SPECIAL BLESSING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. NOT FOR THE SUPER-SAINTS, BUT FOR EVERYONE WHO, HOWEVER FAINTLY, TREMBLINGLY, HALF-HEARTEDLY TRUSTS IN HIM.

SO WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT ACTUALLY MAKE IN OUR LIVES? YOU AND ME, TODAY AND TOMORROW. SITTING HERE IN CHURCH OR LYING IN BED WIDE AWAKE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT.

LETS BEGIN WITH WHAT JESUS SPOKE OF SO OFTEN. PEACE. HE CALLED THE HOLY SPIRIT THE COMFORTER.

OFTEN, OFTEN I'VE HEARD PEOPLE SAY SOMETHING LIKE THIS: 'I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD BE ABLE TO COPE, BUT **SOMEHOW**, **SOMEHOW** EVEN IN THE MIDST OF THIS TERRIBLE THING I HAVE COPEDED. I'VE BEEN CALM AND AT PEACE.' THAT *SOMEHOW* IS THE HOLY SPIRIT, HELPING US TO KNOW AT GUT LEVEL IF YOU LIKE, THAT ULTIMATELY **ALL WILL BE WELL** BECAUSE OUR LIVES ARE IN THE HAND OF GOD. GOD WHO LOVES US AND CARE FOR US INFINITELY MORE THAN WE COULD EVER KNOW.

IT'S ABOUT GETTING ENGAGED WITH GOD'S PRESENCE...

THINK OF THIS EXAMPLE: YOU HAVE THE CHOICE TO COME TO CHURCH ON SUNDAY - OR NOT. CHURCH WILL BE THERE IN ANY CASE. BUT SAY YOU DECIDE TO COME - AS YOU HAVE THIS MORNING, AND A PARTICULAR HYMN, OR THE WORDS OF THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER, OR EVEN THE SMILE AND WARMTH OF THE PERSON SITTING NEXT TO YOU REALLY WARMS YOUR HEART. YOU LEAVE THE CHURCH WITH A RENEWED SENSE OF GOD'S LOVE FOR YOU -IN THIS MORNINGS TERMS THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS SPOKEN TO YOU.

YOU COULD HAVE CHOSEN NOT TO COME -AND BY THAT CHOICE YOU WOULD NOT HAVE MADE YOURSELF AVAILABLE FOR GOD TO SPEAK TO YOU IN THAT WAY.

DO SEE WHAT I'M GETTING AT ... THE SPIRIT WILL SPEAK TO US -WE WILL RECEIVE THAT GIFT OF INNER PEACE - BUT IT HELPS IF WE MAKE OURSELVES AVAILABLE TO GOD.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT MAY BE FOR YOU - I'M CERTAINLY NOT SUGGESTING YOU OUGHT TO COME TO CHURCH MORE OFTEN -THAT WAS BY WAY OF AN ILLUSTRATION. THERE ARE MANY WAYS OF BEING OPEN TO GOD. A GOOD WALK IN THIS LOVELY COUNTRYSIDE MIGHT BE ONE. SITTING QUIETLY FOR SOME MOMENTS IN THE MIDDLE OF A BUSY DAY, LISTENING TO BEAUTIFUL MUSIC, LIGHTING A CANDLE...OR MAYBE STANDING ON A PACKED ESCALATOR IN THE MIDDLE OF LONDON AND SEEING ALL THE PEOPLE THAT GOD HAS CREATED IN A NEW WAY, ... MANY , MANY WAYS. BUT SAYING IN YOUR HEART -COME HOLY SPIRIT! LIVING YOUR LIFE WITH YOUR SPIRITUAL EYES OPEN. LIVING YOUR LIFE WITH YOUR SPIRITUAL EYES OPEN.

IF YOU BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE ONE WHOLE, INTEGRATED PERSON -BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT -THEN THIS IS WHAT NORMALITY SHOULD BE YOU.

IN A MOMENT WE ARE GOING TO CELEBRATE COMMUNION -AND TODAY THE EMPHASIS IS ON THE WORD CELEBRATE -GOD WITH US, AMONGST US, ALWAYS, EVERYWHERE. REMEMBERING THE SHEER EFFERVESCENT JOY OF THAT DAY WE'LL BE USING CHAMPAGNE.

REJOICING THAT AMONG US -NOT IN THE DISTANCE  
DISPENSED BY PRIESTS -BUT RIGHT HERE IN THE MIDDLE  
OF US -JUST FOR TODAY WE'VE BROUGHT THE ALTAR  
DOWN AND CAROLYN AND I ARE GOING TO CO-  
CELEBRATE. SPECIALLY AS A SIGN THAT WE ARE ALL EQUAL  
-THAT THE DAY OF PENTECOST HAD NO FAVOURITES -  
GOD'S SPRIT POURED OUT EXTRAVAGENTLY.

YOU MAY FIND IT CHALLENGING -SPECIALLY IF YOUR  
FAITH IS A PRIVATE, SECRET THING. BUT THERE IS NO  
DOUBT THAT TODAY OF ALL DAYS IS ABOUT THE LOVE OF  
GOD BEING ON THE EDGE, RISKY, UNPREDICTABLE,  
EXCITING. -SO SIP THAT FIZZ AS A SIGN THAT THE LIFE  
SPRING OF GOD'S LOVE IS WITHIN YOU.

AMEN.

ROSIE HARPER