

Pentecost has not ended

There is a commonality I've heard in the stories of people getting glasses for the first time in their saying 'There's so much to see; I hadn't realised my eyesight was so poor'. Usually we don't think about our seeing – unless there is a specific reason – we just do it. What we see is what we see.

That's similar also to our attitudes, philosophies, even religion. They are ways of seeing or frameworks of thinking that help us understand what we see and guide us how we react and act. Once formed we might not think about them much – they are the unnoticed glasses on our brains – but times can come when we take the glasses off for a moment to clean and polish the lenses and for that moment – when the world is now fuzzy – we might contemplate the way things are – or more to the point, the way we believe things are.

I think I'm going to get myself into trouble this week – hopefully not – but I might cause some unease – because I've been asked a question for my programme on Lutheran Radio UK and it occurred to me that the answer really does depend on how you see things. The question is: 'Where are the dead?' – and I'm going to ask various people to tell me where.

The story of Pentecost – the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples 50 days after Jesus' resurrection and 10 days after his ascension – is not so much an account of new glasses but courage, strength, and power to wear them in the world. The new glasses was, of course, the death and resurrection of Jesus which has totally reoriented how one sees life and understands God and the meaning and purpose of our existence. Jesus' death as the perfect sacrifice for our sins opened the way for us to regard life as more than what we see, hear, taste, touch, feel, and imagine. God in our human image is just a bigger and flawed version ourselves but Jesus is the image of the invisible God who created and rescued us from our spiritual deserts and hells.

All religions offer something for the future. All religions have ethical standards of various kinds; you're supposed to behave in certain ways. Most religions have deities. But only Christianity has Jesus as truly human, truly divine – as Lord and Saviour – who died and rose again so that we might live with God now and always. That's what was forming in the disciples' heads over the 40 days since Jesus' resurrection and his ascension means that they are no longer confined to a location – not bound to become religious tour guides taking people to where they saw Jesus do this miracle, that teaching, instituted the Last Supper, where he was arrested, crucified, and the GPS of where they saw him alive again and from where he ascended. No. They were to be witnesses going out because Jesus was with them – just as the people who came to faith from their messages discovered for themselves.

Pentecost is the sending out by the power of the Holy Spirit of the followers of Jesus into the world so that others may be rescued from the prison of sin, death, and hell and know freedom in the Lord and then live in that freedom – serving others. How's that for a paradox? Almost as big as the cross is the best picture of the power and wisdom of God.

So on this Pentecost 2014 I was drawn to the psalm appointed for today – verses from Psalm 25 – and while it is David's – and maybe because I am getting older I started to imagine what Peter might have reflected on at the end of his life as he recalled his speech to the crowd in Jerusalem – the excitement and, I'm sure, the chaos of that day when by the end of it they had grown from 120 believers to about 3,120! Peter's life was one of energy, action, leadership, conflict and learning and maybe relearning (I think we all judge that he acted poorly at one stage with some Gentiles and Paul was right to call him on it). Church tradition has him crucified upside down in Rome. This Easter season we have been listening to 'resurrection realities' from the first letter attributed to him – a letter written a long time after Pentecost – where he was explaining what seeing the world with 'resurrection glasses' meant in a world that was giving you a hard time.

But now to Psalm 25 ...

*[Of David]
To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.*

*O my God, in you I trust;
let me not be put to shame;
let not my enemies exult over me.
Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame;
they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all the day long.
Remember your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for the sake of your goodness, O Lord!
Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.
All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.
For your name's sake, O Lord,
pardon my guilt, for it is great.
Who is the man who fears the Lord?
Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose.
His soul shall abide in well-being,
and his offspring shall inherit the land.
The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him,
and he makes known to them his covenant.
My eyes are ever toward the Lord,
for he will pluck my feet out of the net. (Psalm 25:1-15 ESV)*

I hear age and experience – not all of it good – but there is a confidence that comes with a long term relationship. We imagine that long term relationships are good things – for a couple, if we have romantic glasses on, we imagine people knowing the other so well that they can finish each other's sentences but some studies say that younger married couples knew more about each other right now than older married couples because – it is suggested – older couples tend to assume or guess more than actually talk about how they are living and changing. Many things are important for longevity in relationships not least of which is communication.

So David's confidence is based on the relationship God has established – make me to know your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths – lead me in truth and teach me.

That has to be one of the best descriptions or summaries about the Holy Spirit. The Third Person of the Trinity has been called the 'shy member' of the Trinity because he doesn't want any attention on him but all eyes on Jesus. Jesus of course points to the Father and when we 'look up' as it were, we hear a voice telling us to listen to Jesus. Of course I'm speaking figuratively but truthfully because we don't see Jesus or the Father. And then looking again at Jesus we hear that he and the Father will send us the Spirit – the Spirit of Truth – the Comforter – the Counsellor and Advocate – and he will be with us and lead us.

But we don't see him either! Instead this hidden divine worker gets us to focus on what Jesus is – the Word made flesh – and what he said about words, water, bread and wine – and binding himself to these means, the Holy Spirit works to give us life, to guide us, to shape us while our experiences are varied and personal as we live in this relationship.

The Holy Spirit is particularly interested in sin – dealing with it in our lives because Jesus dealt with it on the cross. Back to the psalm and we can imagine some of the things that troubled David – sins that shamed him –

and the consequences of his sins that still plagued him – and he asks God to remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions – I don't read them as the same things – according to your steadfast love remember me. When Jesus spoke about the Holy Spirit in the locked room and established the office of the ministry, the focus was particularly the forgiveness of sins. Peter's Pentecost sermon ends with a call to repentance and the promise of the forgiveness of sins. Time and time again we find links between the Holy Spirit and sin – the conviction of sin and the forgiveness of sin. I think that is one reason why people do find it hard to keep at a devotional life – daily reading, meditating, and praying God's Word – because the Holy Spirit wants to deal with this aspect of our life – and sometimes we don't want to – so we can stop start through life.

But isn't it true that whenever we return to the Lord – maybe on a Sunday when we really haven't given Jesus a thought all week – or after a long time doing 'our thing' – or even at the end of a busy day – that even if we're bruised or suffering or terribly ashamed – that again and again we find all the teachings of the catechism true – that God doesn't hold our sins against us – that he does forgive us – that he will not abandon us to the consequences of our sins in this world and he will help us resist temptation and amend our behaviour. It doesn't seem right in one sense – after whatever it is we've done – but God pardons our guilt – instructs us how we should live – and continues to offer us friendship by returning us to his promises at the cross, at the font, and at the table.

The dust of Pentecost has long settled. Excitement gives way to routines – to what we think of as ordinary – the regular patterns of our lives – whether we spend time with Jesus daily, or on an 'our needs' basis, or weekly, or less frequently. Nevertheless the Holy Spirit remains active – he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies people into the one truth faith – keeping their eyes on Jesus – so that when Christians look at the world or back over their lives they see things differently to the world – they see things others don't see – that Jesus has not abandoned them, that Jesus allows things to happen that puzzle even anger them at the time but later they see that Jesus brings about good in all circumstances – that Jesus loves them – that Jesus loves you.

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