Blood and Fire - Pentecost 2024

I stayed up all night wondering where the sun went - then it dawned on me.

OK, I know, a bad one - but at least I can say it wasn't original - I borrowed it.

I like to start my sermons with something to put you in a good frame of mind, but I can't always do it. That is why you got this awful joke.

Today, the Day of Pentecost, is a day of crisis in the Christian year. Crisis in the Japanese sense, because they have two kanjis for the word, 'Crisis.' Even the word 'kanji' is a crisis in itself, because it is a Japanese word using Chinese characters.

The two characters used mean, individually, 'Danger', and 'Opportunity'.

But before I get to the reason for that, theologically, I want to share a moment from an operating room in Johannesburg General Hospital from around 1999 or 2000.

A young lady had come in to the Trauma bay after a major road collision, deeply comatose from a serious head injury - along with several other lesser injuries. After the requisite time period had elapsed to see if she was going to wake up, and all the relevant tests for the diagnosis of 'brain death' had been satisfied - twice - she was taken to the OR for organ harvest, as it is called.

I had been involved in the renal (kidney) transplant programme in the UK, peripherally, whilst training, and had a fair idea of what that involved. I had not anticipated the sheer scale of a full organ harvest before, let alone witnessed it. I shall not go into detail here, to spare the sensitivities of those of you with a delicate constitution, but I will say that anything and everything that could be taken was taken - right up to the last puff of the ventilator as the lungs were lifted from the thoracic cavity, along with the heart.

The most striking thing about her at the end was her pallor - she had been drained of all the blood in her body.

I wrote a poem about it later that night; don't worry, I'm not going to make you hear it. All that was left was the shell of a human being - but her danger had been translated into opportunities for all the recipients of her healthy organs. Her crisis, while lethal for her, was overwhelmingly positive for others. Her liver alone was divided up and saved three separate individuals needing transplants.

I have often said that I am not a 'hellfire and brimstone' preacher, and that's true - in the sense that I don't dwell on the presence or absence of the roasting on pitchforks for eternity.

However, the psalm and the quotes from Joel give us plenty of dramatic imagery to allow me to entitle my sermon 'Blood and Fire' today.

Our psalm talks of 'he who looks at the earth, and it trembles, who touches the mountains, and they smoke'; the Acts reading tells of 'the blowing of a violent wind ', and 'The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood,' and again, 'blood and fire and billows of smoke.'

All of this is a bit terrifying - and rightly so, for it is designed to make us aware of the power of the Living God. Hebrews 10:31 says 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God.' The Greek word for 'fearful' is 'phoberon' - from which we get 'phobia'. The word is also translated in other versions as 'dreadful' and 'terrifying'.

To me, I find these prophecies rather reassuring, as they remind me of the power God showed at the moment of crucifixion.

Matthew's account details it; 'From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land.' That fits in perfectly with Joel's prediction that 'the sun will be turned to darkness…'

At the moment Jesus gives up his spirit, Matthew says, 'At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to

bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open.'

Again, foretold in the psalm we read this morning; 'he who looks at the earth, and it trembles, who touches the mountains, and they smoke'.

This apocalyptic imagery is a part of many major events in the telling of how God shakes our consciousness and grabs our attention.

Think back to the Israelites leaving Egypt, with the pillar of fire and cloud, which, of course, looks like smoke.

Think of Moses going into the cloud on Mount Sinai to collect the Ten Commandments.

I'm not going to list all of these possible events, but simply make the point that sometimes something literally earth shattering has to occur in order to shake us out of our torpor and take notice.

The day of Pentecost was one such day.

A rushing wind and tongues of fire, followed by glossolalia (speaking in tongues) would have been pretty scary for all concerned - both disciples and hearers.

But let us try and make some sense of this.

We have seen the moment when Jesus sent out his disciples, two by two, to perform miracles - which they did.

There is a good episode of The Chosen which explores this phenomenon. The apostle, James, is disturbed by the whole business. After they have all met together after the event, and swapped stories of how this and that happened and everyone had an experience of amazing power, James stops them all in their tracks and says, "But we have no understanding."

All of them agree, and say they must wait until Jesus comes back to explain things.

That was **not** the moment when they were given the Holy Spirit. That moment doesn't come until Pentecost - when, in addition to being filled with power, they are also filled with understanding - and able, for the first time, to explain to **themselves** what the purpose, power, and mission of Jesus was - as the Messiah, who died and rose again.

The purpose of the gift of the Holy Spirit is not to have power to perform miracles, so much as to be 'led into all truth'. The NIV says in John 16:13 'But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.'

Now please don't go away thinking that you have just acquired the gift of divination, and rush out, buy a crystal ball, and start reading

tea-leaves. We have yet to discuss the whole business of how we first discern the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and then how they are to be used.

To begin with, I think it is important to realize that because you have been given one or more gifts of the Spirit, it does not mean that you have the whole candy store. Nor do you become the ultimate magician or wonder-worker.

The disciples were allowed power to show what was **possible** in the name of Jesus; but remember too, that whatever we do in His name will have to be in accordance with His will. That is why our Lord's Prayer has the words, 'Thy will be done.'

The coming of the Holly Spirit in our lives is not something to be taken lightly. It comes at our baptism; and for most of us, that will have been when we were unable to understand what was going on.

Pentecost Sunday is also called 'Whit' Sunday, because it was the time of year when people were baptized en masse. Often as adults, and would be dressed in white - hence, 'Whit' Sunday - White Sunday.

Thus you need to know that when you understand what has been done for you - either by your parents for infant baptism, or for yourself, as an adult - it is like realizing

that you have been given the codes to the nuclear button. It is that sort of power.

And because it is that sort of power, it needs to be treated with enormous respect, such that use of that power is only to be employed by those with a deep understanding of what it is they wield.
Such power is not for idiots or the insane - but in earthly terms we often see - with appropriate fear - that it is.
Those deluded men and women who hold such fearsome power are not to be trusted or followed, but we must do all that we can to remove such potential lethal power from them.

Our job is to use the power of the Holy Spirit of God - as demonstrated by Jesus - for its proper purposes - that is in step with his will and purpose for this world, and an appropriate time and place.
This will be of His choosing, not ours.

What this means is that each of us has the power of Christ within us following our baptism, if we truly believe the promises we made at that time, but we will not be able to use it unless He wills it.
What we **can** use are the other, lesser gifts of the Spirit that we read about in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 12. These we will discuss at another time, but for

now I want you to be very aware that you could and can do the things that Jesus and his disciples did - if and when the right moment comes along.

Look for those moments, pray for those moments - not to make yourselves look good, but to bring glory to the name of Jesus.

Then, truly, the Son will rise in you.