

Message for May 31, 2020

Acts 2:1-13

As some of you may already know, I have long been a fan of the TV show 'Survivor'. Some time ago Susan asked me, "How can you watch it when the behaviour of the contestants with their lying and scheming is so un-Christian?" And so it is but even so, I still find the people and their behaviour fascinating.

For those of you who are not familiar with it, a group of people are put in an isolated location for thirty-nine days, usually somewhere in the tropics. They are divided into tribes and in each episode there are usually two competitions. The first is for some sort of 'reward' and the other is for immunity. The tribe that loses the immunity challenge is forced to vote off one of its members and this is where all of the plotting and scheming comes in. "I won't vote for you if you don't vote for me. Why don't we vote so and so off?" Eventually the tribes merge and at the end of the season the jury, which is made up of those who were previously voted off, vote for one of the last three people left to win the title of 'Survivor' and the million dollar prize. But why am I writing about this TV show? Simply because one of its little rituals has made its way into popular culture.

When the name of the person being voted off a tribe is read out, he or she brings their lit torch forward. The host, Jeff Probst, then snuffs out the flames while saying the now well-known phrase "the tribe has spoken." This is of course a bit hokey but it is also very symbolic. The lit torch symbolizes the life of the contestant in the game and once their flame is snuffed out they are gone. Fire though really does mean life too. One of the very first things that the contestants have to learn is how to get a fire going since it is an absolute necessity. Without a fire they can't boil the water and so ensure its safety. Without a fire they can't cook. Without a fire there is no source of warmth during the cool nights. In short, without a fire life is very difficult if not impossible. Hokey as it may be then, the show's emphasis on fire reminds us that once upon a time, and not all that long ago either, fire was an absolute necessity.

Living where we do, as we do, fire is not a daily part of most of our lives. To be sure we may enjoy sitting in front of a fireplace or a campfire but if anything, most of us find fire more than a little bit frightening. Speaking from first-hand experience, there are few things more frightening than being in a house and hearing someone shout 'fire!' and mean it. Every summer on the news we witness tremendous destructive forest fires. Sometimes on the news we hear of industrial fires that release all sorts of poisonous toxins into the air. Truly fire is not a part of our daily lives and when we do think of it we usually do so in negative terms, and yet?

As the TV show 'Survivor' reminds us, far from representing death and destruction fire can also symbolize life. At one time in fact fire was even thought to be one of God's greatest blessings and so it is no mistake that when God joined his people through the Holy Spirit, his coming was symbolized by tongues of flame.

Today is Pentecost Sunday and that is what we remember today, the coming of the Holy Spirit in the tongues of flame accompanied by a mighty rushing wind. Pentecost has so many different meanings. Pentecost for example marks the formal beginning or 'birthday' as if it were of the Christian church. Pentecost is also about renewal and revival as well: that with God anything and everything is possible. Pentecost is also about God's presence. God the Father and God the Son are in heaven but even so, God in the person of the Holy Spirit is here and now; present, active and involved in our lives and in the life of the world. Yet while Pentecost is most certainly about all of these things, it is also about something else too.

I don't know how many times I have read Luke's account of what happened that Pentecost Sunday so long ago, but as I was thinking about what to write this week my attention was captured by one line in particular. After telling us about the flames and the wind, Luke wrote: "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit."

I have read this line so many times but it never really occurred to me before that Luke said that "they were ALL filled with the Holy Spirit." According to Luke there were 120 people present in the room when this

happened and yet the Spirit came upon every single one of them. The Spirit didn't just descend on the original eleven disciples, nor did it just descend on the men or the women, or the oldest or the youngest either. It didn't just descend on the wisest, the smartest or the best educated. It didn't just descend on the richest or the poorest. The flames fell on ALL of them and being touched by the Spirit, each one of them had their own unique ministry and role to play in the life of the church and the world beyond. The message and promise of the Pentecost flames was that the lives of every single one of them had value, purpose and meaning but of course what went for them goes for us as well. All too often perhaps we may be tempted to think that we and our lives don't really matter in the great scheme of things but nothing could be further from the truth. We all have our own unique role to fill in that wonderful play we call life. Even if we don't always realize it or think so, our lives do have value, purpose and meaning but of course what goes for us also goes for all the rest of God's children.

While it has yet to spread to our own nation, there is a passionate debate taking place within the Church in the United States at the present time. This debate is over whether or not churches should be allowed to be open for Sunday worship. On one side are those who insist that the churches should be open. Their argument is that no government or secular authority has any power to tell the Church what it can and cannot do; the Church is accountable to God and only to God. Some are taking this one step further and saying that continuing to worship at the present time is a testimony to their faith and commitment; such is their faith and commitment that they will keep worshipping together despite the risk to their health and perhaps even their lives. We might admire their faith and commitment, their willingness to 'Dare to be a Daniel' but even so, their behaviour raises a troubling question. Yes, it is their choice to risk their health and perhaps even their lives for what they believe is right but what about the health of others? Is it Christ-like to endanger the lives of others in the broader community because of an insistence on physically gathering together to worship? Far from being an act of faith, such behaviour is extremely self-centred and ignores one of the great meanings of Pentecost; that every

single person's life has value, purpose and meaning. Indeed it is this belief that makes the news in our own province this past week so disturbing.

The big news story of the past week was of course the release of the military's report on the conditions in some, and the emphasis must be on the word 'some', of our long term nursing homes. The report makes for very grim reading and there is no shortage of answers for what has happened and why. The bottom line though is that some of our society's most vulnerable people have been, or are living in almost unimaginably deplorable conditions. As I just wrote, there is no shortage of answers to the question why this has happened but there is one underlying reason; the belief, attitude and assumption of some people that the lives of the residents have no real value, purpose or meaning. To think this and even worse to believe this however goes against everything that we remember today. Indeed to think this goes against everything that Christ ever taught, lived, died and was raised for.

Symbolized by the tongues of fire, the Spirit came upon all of them at Pentecost and in doing so God proclaimed that every single one of their lives and, by implication, the lives of everyone else are precious to God and have value, purpose and meaning. We all matter; this is a timeless message but one that perhaps we need to be reminded of from time to time, including the present.