

As the Gentle Rain From Heaven:

A sermon for Pentecost Sunday 15 May 2016

John 14.8-17; Acts 2.1-21

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I know that everyone here knows what this is. And I know that if I were to ask you, none of you would say, "That looks like a cactus stalk with its thorns plucked out and pushed back into the flesh and left to dry with seeds and gravel inside." I know you are like the poet Seamus Heaney who wrote about the rainstick and said: **"Upend the rainstick and what happens next is a music that you never would have known to listen for."** And as I upend this rainstick, ... the music we hear is of course ... the sound of rain.

But there is rain, and there is rain. And the rain in Vancouver, B.C., can be very pleasant to live with. My wife, Julie, and I spent some years in Vancouver. One summer it rained every single day, non-stop: morning, noon, and night; June to September. But you get used to living with that kind of rain: a steady but soft rain; a rain that quietly and gently paints the city green.

Unlike you who heard rain coming from a cactus stalk, at some point, Julie and I simply stopped paying attention. We put on good rain gear, and simply got on with daily life. We stopped hearing the rain. After a while, the constant blanket of rain became everyday landscape. And nothing more.

The Holy Spirit can be like Vancouver rain. The Holy Spirit is nothing less than God coming alive in each one of us. **But how easily does she become simply Christian landscape we no longer see. This is why we need this Feast of Pentecost.**

Our first time visitors will have noticed the bright colours in our congregation, yellows, orange and red: it is not, as you might think, a tribute to the May heat wave. **It is our way of saying that the Holy Spirit is reaching the church, touching down and spreading like wildfire.**

However, I was thinking this week that this must be difficult to hear for the people suffering the wildfires in Canada. A few hours from now, our brothers and sisters of Fort McMurray, will join their church communities for worship in improvised spaces. And they will hear in today's Scripture readings that the power of God rains down on the disciples as tongues of fire.

But in Fort McMurray, fire has ravaged homes and livelihoods. Thank God, that for the most part human life has been miraculously spared. But fire has consumed animal life and thousands of acres of prairie. If it were London, the fire would have covered nearly everything north of the Thames enclosed by the M25. **So how are Canadian Christians going to hear Good News in the coming of God's Spirit with the force of fire?**

I got in touch with the Canadian bishop who has pastoral care in the areas affected by the fire (Bishop Fraser Lawton, Diocese of Athabasca). I wanted Bishop Fraser to know, first of all, that we in this church hold them in our prayers. The Bishop wrote back immediately sending his love and greetings to this church community, and thanking us on behalf of his churches and people for our prayers. But I also wanted the Bishop's thoughts on preaching the message of Pentecost in the wake of the fire. The fire raged with such force that flames jumped over a river one-kilometre wide, and reached the other side to in a path of destruction. How would Bishop Fraser speak to his churches today? Here (in paraphrase) is what the bishop wrote:

You pose an interesting question, which I myself was contemplating this morning. I think I would need to ask some of those who fled through the fire as to how they feel about that. There is of course the destructive power of the fire and the experience of fear and having to flee. But fire can be found in very useful and helpful places, too, effecting good things for us. I suppose it speaks to the power of fire: it is not safe. But, C.S. Lewis once said God is not "safe" or controllable, either: **"Of course he isn't safe. But he's good." In a similar way, the presence of the Holy Spirit – the power of God – can accomplish great things, but we should not think He is a toy or safe entertainment."**

These are the words of Bishop Fraser, and so our prayers are with his churches and people.

For me, one of the privileges of being part of this community, is that as I get to know some of you, I can appreciate increasingly the diverse and particular ways that, in your life, God isn't safe, or predictable, or under control.

I always think of Nelson Mandela as someone who never played it safe. And not just in politics, but in his faith. Mandela was convinced that Christian hope had to make a difference even in the confines of prison life. Yet facing, as Mandela did, a history of injustice oftentimes dressed up in Christian clothing, it is not difficult to understand why Mandela's faith has been described as "a thorny journey." But the journey had to

be specially thorny precisely because Mandela took seriously the Christian story of transformation.

For Mandela, Christianity was nothing if it could not break political oppression in South Africa. And it was nothing if it could not break the chains of racial hatred outside his prison walls. And it was nothing if this work of God did not begin inside his cell on Robben Island, and later in Pollsmoor Prison.

Mandela, it seems, was specially close to the chaplains who came to visit the prison. In a letter to the Archbishop of Cape Town, he wrote: "in such an environment, each sermon made us feel that we had a million friends.... [the ministry of the chaplains] not only enriched the spirit, even more, it left one full of hope."

When Mandela died a few years ago, a chaplain at Pollsmoor Prison told this story:

Each time when I arrived at the prison to celebrate the Eucharist, a warder had to be present to keep an eye on me and to hear every word that I said, to be sure that I was not passing on or receiving any politically inflammatory messages.

On this particular occasion, [during the service of the Eucharist] when I reached the Peace, Mandela gently stopped me and went over to the young warder on watch.

"Brand," he asked, "are you a Christian?" "Yes," responded the warder Christo Brand. "Well then," said Mandela, "you must take off your cap, and join us round this table. You cannot sit apart. This is holy communion, and we must share and receive it together."

The chaplain goes on to say, "to my utter astonishment, Brand meekly removed his cap, and, joining the circle, received holy communion. I was deeply humbled because I, the priest, had not thought of doing that."¹

When God the Holy Spirit ignites a fire in people, the world must look something like it did that day, at that moment, in that prison, when Mandela invited his warder to communion. This is the world the Holy Spirit throws open for us today.

God's Holy Spirit is always all round us, dropping "as the gentle rain from heaven." But today, specially, the Spirit comes in power to mend, to heal and forgive; to gather

us and embolden us for Christ's Gospel. And so, in this Pentecost hope, let us close in a prayer for the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Let us pray.

The Holy Spirit sits like a bird,
is brooding on waters, wings over earth,
and dances in fire;
she speaks our mother tongue:
and teaches us to speak.
So come Holy Spirit: Holy Spirit, come.

Where in our lives do we need God
with the power to mend and make us whole?
Where in our lives do we need God
to forgive and restore lost hope?
Where in our lives do we need God
to refresh us; to breathe life into us; to return to us?
Come Holy Spirit: Holy Spirit, come.

In our lives today, we need the Holy Spirit
to rekindle God's image in us.
In our lives today, we need the Holy Spirit
to embolden us to face what fear most.
In our lives today, we need the Holy Spirit:
to gather us and to send us
and to move ahead of us.
In our lives today, we need the Holy Spirit:
to protect us, to surround us,
to empower us, to direct us.
So come Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit come.
Amen

¹ For the full story, see 'He Shone With The Light of Christ', *The Church Times* (Dec 2013)