

WIND and FIRE
A sermon for the Gibraltar Archdeaconry Synod
Revd Dr Dave Bookless: 29th January 2020, Torrevieja

READINGS: Isaiah 61:1-4
 Psalm 104:24-end
 Acts 2:17-end
 John 20:19-23

Theme of 'Wind and Fire' seems particularly poignant in the light of the Australian bushfires, where these two phenomena associated with the Holy Spirit's presence are causing such devastation; wind and fire bringing death and destruction rather than life and light.

As we think of the Holy Spirit / wind and fire: WHAT DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT MEAN TO YOU?

We often associate the Spirit with God working in a way that is:

- personal
- inner
- spiritual

But that isn't always the case ...

Story of Dave Bookless 30 years ago on holiday on the Isles of Scilly where, at the time, there was no waste collection on the smaller islands. In the act of throwing bags of rubbish onto a former beach, now the island waste tip, a clear but unexpected sense of God's Spirit speaking, through an inner voice:

How do you think I feel about what you're doing to my world?

That question was like the first in a row of dominos that have been falling ever since, provoking me to go back and question all my behaviour, habits and attitudes to God's creation and my lifestyle.

Acts 2:17 Peter, quoting Joel: 'God's Spirit will be poured out on all **flesh**'. The word is not '*anthropoi*' (people) but '*sarx*' (animal flesh), and in the Hebrew of Joel *basar*. As Bishop David reminded us, in John 1 the same point is made: The word becomes flesh, not only human but 'a creature'. This is what incarnation – literally, becoming flesh or even, becoming 'meat' – means. And God's Spirit at Pentecost is poured out not only onto Jewish adult males (which was what convention said), not only onto the very old and very young, not only on women as well as men, not only on Gentiles as well as Jews, but also onto *all flesh*. God's Spirit is at work beyond humanity within all the creatures that God had made.

Psalm 104:30 echoes the same point. 'When you send your Spirit they are created, and you renew the face of the earth'. The Holy Spirit breathes the breath of God into every living creature, not just humans, and 'renews the face of the earth' – in other words the ecological and climatic systems themselves.

Isaiah 61:1-4 is a famous passage because it's the source of Jesus' 'Nazareth Manifesto' in Luke 4 where he stands up in the synagogue, reads these words, and claims they apply to and are fulfilled in him. Yet, here too we find the Holy Spirit's work is not only personal, inner and spiritual. The Spirit is inspiring good news, freedom and deliverance for the poor, the broken-hearted, captives and prisoners. Today, in the light of climate change, the causes of poverty and captivity are often linked to the ways we have destroyed God's creation. As a Bangladeshi aid worker said, "Forget making poverty history. Climate change is making poverty permanent".

And, as we look at Isaiah 61 verses 3 and 4, I believe we can see some of the values and virtues we need as Christians in facing up to today's overwhelming environmental realities. Three words from verse three:

- Beauty ... for ashes
- Joy ... instead of mourning
- Praise ... instead of despair

Aren't those what we need today? For the ashes of the fires in Australia (and so many other places), we see the beauty and resilience of nature – of new growth re-emerging. Alongside our necessary mourning at what we have lost, species driven to extinction, communities forced to abandon their homes, we can have the oil of joy – the Spirit's gift of unity and harmony in relationships – how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity. It is like oil running down Aaron's beard (Psalm 133:2). And rather than sinking into climate anxiety and despair, we can lament and sorrow but then choose to put on the garment of praise – to worship God for who He is and what He has promised – and the hope that brings us.

So, Beauty, Joy and Praise ... and what really struck me in preparing this sermon was the connections between these three values, and three virtues I have been prayerfully talking about. And last week I was at a gathering of leaders from across 9 world religions looking at Climate Change and we had a speaker from Extinction Rebellion (XR), who spoke of remarkably similar values too ...

- **Wonder** ... at nature's beauty and resilience. The XR speaker spoke of **empathy**. And Isaiah 61 puts it simply in terms of **beauty**.
- **Simplicity** ... recognising what matters most is the quality of our relationships not the quantity of our possessions. The XR speaker spoke of **humility** and **frugality**, and Isaiah 61 speaks of **joy**. Being content with enough – keeping it simple!
- **Hope** ... in a context where despair is rife, especially amongst thoughtful and sensitive younger people (and the not so young!), we as Christians have something remarkable to offer in terms of hope. Hope, not as in optimism or belief that science or education or innovation will rescue us, but hope in the character and promises of God. Interestingly this was missing from the XR speaker, but of course it's there in Isaiah 61 'a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair'. Hope is the opposite of despair. The best definition of Christian hope I've come across is from the unlikely source of a Bollywood movie, and it's simply 'It's a fact of future truth'. Whatever the situation now. However desperate things seem, and even when things are getting worse fast, we do not lose hope because God's promises and God's character mean our hope for creation is a fact of future truth.

What does that hope promise? Three words from Isaiah 61:4 – God promises to **REBUILD, RESTORE** and **RENEW**. This damaged and groaning creation will be rebuilt and restored and renewed when Christ returns, and we must live today in the light of that hope.

Two things to finish with:

Isaiah 61:3 speaks of God's people in the power of the Spirit as 'oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord'. I want to take that image and contextualise it. In tropical areas around the world it is mangroves, rather than oaks, that are an image of stability and protection and fruitfulness in times of threat. Mangroves are astonishing plants which thrive at the borders of fresh and salt water. As Christians we're at our best on the borders of the church and the world, with one foot in each. Mangroves have deep,

interconnected root systems that bind the soil and mean that when cyclones come they act as natural shock-absorbers, protecting all that's around them. Churches too, should be centres of resilience in our time of environmental fear and despair. We should have deep roots into God, His Spirit, His Word, the Sacraments, but also deep roots in the places where God has planted us – in the ecology and the community where we are to be fruitful. Mangroves are also nurseries for life: animals, fish, birds, frogs and crabs all live and raise their young in mangrove forests. In an era where life itself faces threats, we as churches should be nurseries for life in all its fulness – demonstrating that spiritual life, community life, sustainable life are possible in the power of God's Spirit.

Finally, a poem from the wonderful American agrarian writer, Wendell Berry:

A Vision - Wendell Berry

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If we will have the wisdom to survive,
to stand like slow-growing trees
on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it,
if we will make our seasons welcome here,
asking not too much of earth or heaven,
then a long time after we are dead
the lives our lives prepare will live
there, their houses strongly placed
upon the valley sides, fields and gardens
rich in the windows. The river will run
clear, as we will never know it,
and over it, birdsong like a canopy.
On the levels of the hills will be
green meadows, stock bells in noon shade.
On the steps where greed and ignorance cut down
the old forest, an old forest will stand,
its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.
The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.
Families will be singing in the fields.
In their voices they will hear a music
risen out of the ground. They will take
nothing from the ground they will not return,
whatever the grief at parting. Memory,
native to this valley, will spread over it
like a grove, and memory will grow
into legend, legend into song, song
into sacrament. The abundance of this place,
the songs of its people and its birds,
will be health and wisdom and indwelling
light. This is no paradisaical dream.
Its hardship is its possibility