

SERMON  
Pentecost 2009B

And so Canon Naylor, the question is:

"When do you blow yours out?" ...

"What on earth are you talking about Canon Foster..."

"Your Paschal Candle, Canon Naylor, your Paschal Candle, when do you blow it out?"

"Pentecost of course... he replies, (then none too subtly) *with the rest of the worldwide Church...*"

"Poor liturgy" replies the Precentor... "after the Gospel on Ascension Day is the place for me." ... referring to those halcyon pre-modernist days of no woolly thinking and practice!

(The nice thing is that Canons who get on so well can disagree about such things amicably and laugh.)

The rest of you say something like... "For goodness sake, Stephen, get a life. In these days of recession, questionable ministerial practices, and other matters of worldly import... you talk about when you blow your Paschal Candle out!"

Of course, the whole point of the discussion was about to what extent Jesus had left us on Ascension Day ...10 days ago, and in what state have we waited for today, and the realisation of Jesus' promise that we would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit?

St Luke is in no doubt that after they had seen Jesus ascend into heaven, the disciples were told to stay in the same city, perhaps even in the same Waiting Room for days, with nothing at all happening. The imagery is that they may well have spent long periods of time together waiting...you an imagine, crossing and uncrossing their legs, sighing heavily, twiddling their thumbs, getting on each others nerves, trying to be faithful to our Lord's command, but not knowing when this period of waiting would end.

'Stay here in the city until...' Jesus said.

They were actually faithful at it, apart from the slight diversion of being impetuous, and choosing a replacement for Judas called Matthias... a mistake in theologians eyes...they should have waited for St Paul to come along!

But then on this day, the Day of Pentecost, in so many ways 'All heaven was let loose'...all moved from the 'all powerless' to the 'all powerful', the 'spiritless to the spiritful', the 'wholly passive to the wholly active'... and the Church was born!

Some Christian Communities are convinced that the only authentic manifestations of the Spirit are those which are similar to this first time...for them it is all or nothing!

When I was a Assistant Curate in Birkenhead I was invited to experience a series of RC Charismatic Services, and then to write an article for a theological journal.

At the services, as the Spirit 'came', almost all started to speak in tongues, many went into trances, and many fainted. The Spirit came, and the Spirit then went. The Spirit seemed to be there at one time wholly and powerfully, and then just as quickly became wholly absent.

In some sense this fits the Lukan text rather well, but it came as a bit of a shock to experience such in the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century Birkenhead dockland.

Some would say that this is the only way the Spirit can be at work, and if you can't speak in tongues you are not really a Christian.

But, for me, and for most, the Church has been sustained and been subject to the Spirit's influence for 2000 years through thick and thin, and certainly not only in this rather 'black and white' mode of expression.

Let me return the image of the Waiting Room... not the disciples' this time but ours!

In our waiting rooms of life, we can be waiting as a solitary in a dentist's waiting room knowing that there is no substitute for me the one and only having to climb into that black chair hear that awful whine, and smell the burning enamel.

In our waiting rooms of life we can be waiting, looking at loads of other people laughing and joking,... but we are pale silent, riveted, waiting for

that awful moment when our flight is called and we are forced to strap ourselves into a very narrow seat, with no hope of getting out, until that little sign goes off, the aircraft has lurched along the runway at some God forsaken speed and we have heard the thump as those things called wheels have disappeared into its belly!

In my own waiting room of life, I have often sat in an Operatic Green Room, when the intercom crackles into life... "Stephen Foster... stage left please... on stage five minutes"!

In these and many others there is little room for any other human being, but as we think and meditate and try to relax and not be afraid, do we think that God is wholly absent.

I think not.

We may be passive, but in my experience, as we sit and reflect, and discern, and form and fashion, the spirit is there at the centre of our beings addressing and inspiring the place in which we find ourselves.

The work of those who discern vocations to any sort of ministry begins on a pair of knees, praying, musing, wrestling, discerning the Spirit.

The work of a liturgist begins on a pair of knees, musing, forming fashioning, discerning the Spirit.

Although seemingly passive the Spirit is most certainly there.

The Ordination candidate who enters this Cathedral in five weeks time, has spent many hours in this spiritual waiting room, and so has the rest of the Church alongside him or her. And then the Litany is sung.

"Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire and lighten with celestial fire"...

the spirit experienced in the passivity of discernment now becomes the spirit of activity and empowerment in ministry.

This is the defining moment... The moment to be grasped within the Church's proclamation of the Gospel.

This defining moment can sometimes be missed...

One short example from a past life will suffice.

Alison, a singing student of mine, who when she came to me had not sung much. So I asked her to bring a piece of music she knew and loved... she did!

It was a miniature of BGT... she opened her mouth and it was a 'sit up and take notice experience' .

We went back to our waiting room... we put one or two things right technically, we learnt some new repertoire, we sang wholly alone.

She had never performed in public.

I was then asked to sing in a major professional gig, and they asked me a couple of months before if I knew anyone who could sing a small mezzo-soprano part.

Yes, I said I do... Alison learnt the part, was able to sing it beautifully... and then came the dress rehearsal.

She burst into tears and said " I can't do this."

Calmly and coolly, this 'horrible person' you now have as your Canon Precentor, gently took her aside and said... "Alison, if you don't sing **neither will I**... and then there will be no show, and hundreds of people will go away very disappointed having missed your wonderful voice."

No pressure there then!

The defining moment for Alison had come. She did sing...she did sing beautifully, and fifteen years on she is still singing beautifully and publically.

Something inside us both knew that this was 'the moment', the waiting room was left, the new power waiting within needed unleashing, and we would not get a second chance.

Archbishop Anthony Bloom, the Orthodox Metropolitan of Great Britain some years ago said:

"The Church should be like an English Sheepdog. He does not move till he receives the signal from his master, but as soon as he does, he goes 'all out' wagging his tail all the time'.

Any Christian in any place and especially in places of leadership in the Church needs to know when to go 'all out wagging their tail'... they need to be able to 'discern the moment' in all sorts of situations, in the vast array of issues which face the present day church.

There is a temptation for some to go all out, assuming the time is always right, and for Christ and the Kingdom to abandon the Waiting Room and simply get 'it' done...whatever 'it' happens to be.

In the first round of talks concerning Anglican- Methodist Union some years ago... a rushed proposal in a worthy cause was lost in General Synod... the Spirit was immediately sent back 'to think again', and the vote was more heavily lost the second time round. The right moment had not been discerned.

The alternative is the will to spend all our time in the waiting room and become totally risk averse, to be swamped by quantity...that same defining moment passes and we 'lose the plot.'

Both are as unworthy as they are unfaithful to the work of the Spirit in our passivity and in our activity.

The work of the Spirit is at work in all our faithful waiting rooms and in all our actions... in different ways admittedly, but there nonetheless.

Golden Sequence...

Sums up for me perfectly what has gone before...