

Pentecost

The disciples were filled with joy when they saw the Lord, and he said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so am I sending you. After saying this, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

John 20, 19-23

The disciples were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.

Acts 2, 1-11



As I was racking my brain wondering what I might write about the readings for this feast of Pentecost, I had a phone call from a friend who was bubbling over from an experience she'd had at the aged-care hostel where her mother is in residence. My friend told me the story of Laura and Clive, a couple in their nineties, who had just celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary. Laura has the beginnings of dementia and Clive, while mentally very alert, is losing his mobility. He and Laura are almost inseparable. In fact they spend most of their waking hours chatting and holding hands. In the days leading up to their wedding anniversary, the staff of the hostel were secretly preparing a little ceremony and a party to mark the big event. In a casual conversation, one of the carers asked Clive if there was anything that he still wanted to do before he died. Clive thought for a few seconds and then replied: "Well, yes, there is one thing that I've always wanted to do - give Laura a diamond ring. I've been trying to save for years to do that but have never been able to manage it." The staff member in whom Clive confided was deeply touched by Clive's disclosure - there was nothing he wanted for himself, just something he wanted for his wife of 65 years. So the carer shared the secret with the other members of staff during their morning-tea break. Their response was to see what they could do to make Clive's wish a reality. They decided to take up a collection among staff and from visitors to the hostel. It turned out that one of the visitors from whom they sought a donation was a jeweller. When he heard the story, he said he would give them a generous discount on a diamond ring and throw in a second ring for Clive. He also promised a bouquet of flowers and a bottle of champagne for the party. The staff finally told Clive and Laura that they were going to have a little ceremony to mark their wedding anniversary and they suggested that each of them might like to write a sentence or two as a way of renewing their marriage vows. When the big day came, a taxi arrived to take Clive and one of the staff on a surprise visit to the jeweller's shop. They went from there to the parish church where the staff had gathered members of Laura and Clive's family and other residents of the hostel. The parish priest blessed the happy couple and Laura and Clive renewed their vows. "You kept me going, and you've kept me young", said Clive to Laura. "I remember how nervous I was on our wedding day", said Laura. "But I'd marry you again", she promised.

There's nothing particularly remarkable about this story of the love that has grown between Laura and Clive, and it's surely been replicated in the lives of countless happily married couples. However, like every love story, it's a revelation of the Spirit of God in action. In the story of every loving relationship, God's Spirit enables the participants to move beyond themselves and their own interests for the benefit and blessing of others. Clive's love for Laura inspired the staff of their hostel, the jeweller, visitors and family members to move beyond themselves and to bring Clive's life-long wish to reality. Pentecost is a celebration of God's gift of the Spirit to us and our world - the gift of love that binds Father to Son and which now binds each of us to God, to one another and to all the people we love. It's a love that often transcends words, a love that gives voice to the things we believe but have difficulty in articulating; it's a love that inspires us with courage and tenacity to work for dreams that often seem beyond our reach. The Spirit of God whom we celebrate at Pentecost enables us to set about re-creating our world and our lives into something more valuable and enduring than diamonds.

There is one other aspect of today's readings that lingers with me. It's the mention in John that the disciples had locked themselves in behind closed doors. They were quite simply frightened. They had shut themselves off from a world that had proved all too hostile. As far as they were concerned, Jesus was gone, his life snuffed out. Fear had paralysed them. It was their own cowardice and denial of Jesus, their concern to protect their own skins that had led them to this sorry state. They deserved to be where they now found themselves, imprisoned by their own fear. It was into this situation that Jesus strode - through walls and closed doors. And instead of coming with recriminations, he came offering peace and empowering them to take to others the same forgiveness that he brought to them. He gave them the gift of his Spirit - the Spirit of the second chance, the Spirit of love that has no room for blame or shame or any other petty motive, the Spirit that would mould them into a community of love and forgiveness. They were transformed by the Spirit into that very first group of wounded healers that became the Church - to bring hope and healing to a broken world in the name of the Gospel.

As we reflect on what it must have been like for the disciples who had locked themselves away in fear behind closed doors, we might do well to ponder the walls and doors behind which we can hide when we find the work of the Gospel too tough - walls of prejudice, doors of suspicion, barriers of inflexibility, erected to block the way of the Spirit of God's love.

The celebration of Pentecost is an invitation to each of us to come out of hiding and to be daring enough to welcome God's Spirit in.