

Today we celebrate Pentecost – when the disciples received the Holy Spirit. It was like flames of fire and a mighty rushing wind. Whether or not you call Pentecost the ‘birthday of the church’ it was certainly a pivotal moment in the emerging Christian story. From now on, the New Testament no longer calls them disciples, but ‘apostles’ – a word that means ‘sent out’.. The Book of Acts tells that their mission was to be sent out to tell the message of Jesus to the whole world.

Today, I changed the reading from *Acts Chapter 2* somewhat. The lectionary takes us up to verse 21, at which point, Peter has stood up and spoken to the crowd. We have read further to know what he said to “fire them up.” Peter testified that he and the other disciples were witnesses to the resurrection of the crucified Jesus Christ – evidence, he said, that Jesus, whom the crowd had crucified, was God’s Messiah. People asked, “So what should we do?” Peter replied that they must repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Their sins would be forgiven, and, in a statement that includes all of us, “You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For that promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, for everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”

Peter basically said that the condition for receiving the Holy Spirit is to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord. But what does that mean in practice? To “believe in” someone means that we trust them. That person could be like a mentor to us, someone that we admire. So if we trust in Jesus as a mentor, we have to ask ourselves what it is that we specially admire about Jesus, as the Gospels present him to us.

Peter told the crowd that all that was necessary was repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ as God’s Messiah. But faith in Jesus Christ has to go beyond an abstraction. It implies deciding about how we live our lives. Several years ago, Bishop Michael commented that Christianity began as a movement of Spirit guided by faith, but soon clotted (I love that word) into a catalogue of beliefs administered by a clerical class. When Peter spoke on Pentecost Day, there was no New Testament and no 2000 years of Church doctrine. His ideas about what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah must have come directly from “the horse’s mouth”. But even Peter must have thought some things that Jesus said were more important than others.

So I have to ask, what is my “catalogue of beliefs”? What are yours? They may not be the same – in fact, they probably aren’t. For me, the ideas of love and respect for one another, care and kindness for the less fortunate, and bringing the Kingdom of God closer to reality in our time and place are the most compelling aspects of the Gospel message. I was moved to think about this question again by an article in April’s *Atlantic Monthly*, in which Michael Gerson, a prominent evangelical author, attempts to explain how the American evangelical movement has lost its way. Why does this group of Christians support a President who espouses distinctly non-Christian values? “[His] unapologetic equation of financial and social success with human achievement is a negation of Christian teaching. His tribalism and hatred for “the other” stand in direct opposition to Jesus’ radical ethic of neighbourly love [as do his] strength-worship and contempt for “losers”.

To explain the origin of that support, Gerson traced the trajectory of American evangelicalism over the past two centuries. Back then, American evangelicals were like other Protestants – they opposed social

ills, and supported ideas like the temperance movement, prison reform, humane treatment of the mentally ill, and an end to slavery. Where they differed was in the great emphasis that the evangelical movement placed on being always ready for the Second Coming of Christ. If you believe, as did the New Testament authors, that the Second Coming and the Final Judgement are just around the corner, then being ready to face your Maker is your top priority. Alleviation of human misery becomes secondary. There were evangelical Christian pastors in Jerusalem this week at the ceremony to open the US embassy precisely because of their belief that the final confrontation will be centred in Jerusalem. Their unflinching support of the State of Israel is predicated on bringing those things about.

To complete Gerson's story, by the 20th century, evangelicalism began to stress the literal interpretation of the Bible, and to reject scientific discoveries such as evolution and the age of the Earth as non-Scriptural. They came to view reverence for life and family values in terms of opposition to abortion and same-sex relationships. For some, consumerism has led to the Prosperity Gospel as the antithesis of what Jesus preached, and minimized concern for alleviating social problems. The US now has a noisily angry, homophobic and anti-science faction of Christians who because of political tribalism have aligned with a President with obvious moral and non-Christian flaws.

It is impossible to disentangle matters of faith from politics (not party politics), because faith (your "catalogue of beliefs") has to be put into action in this world, whether that means advocating for feeding the hungry or opposing abortions. In contrast with evangelicals, 'mainline' or 'Progressive' Protestants have always seen the alleviation of human misery through ending social ills as a prerequisite to establishing God's kingdom on earth. That is my own theology – though I'm not trying to impose it on anyone else. I am drawn to Jesus' repeated emphasis that the Kingdom of God has drawn near. For me, that makes our paramount task to make this world a better place. That means to act with kindness towards our neighbours, and to alleviate human suffering in this time and place. By doing so, we can hope to bring the Kingdom of God a little closer than it would be otherwise.

As I just said, putting one's "catalogue of beliefs" into action means politics. Party politics are relevant for us right now, because we have to make a decision as to how to vote in just 18 days. Without wanting to instruct anyone how to vote, I must say this. If, for each of us, faith is to be more than an abstraction that is divorced from the 'real world', it seems to me that we have to consider the values espoused by the candidates, the parties, and the leaders. I am referring to values, not to faith perspectives. Even in the rough and tumble of all-candidates' meetings and leaders' debates, do the participants project values of kindness, and concern for the plight of the less fortunate?

To finish, I have to remark that Peter, Paul, and the Gospel writers were wrong about an imminent Second Coming and Final Judgement. It hasn't happened for 2000 years and my guess is that it won't come tomorrow either. At the risk of seeming unusually heretical, I would go farther still. Many of our Eucharistic prayers include the affirmation "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again." Perhaps the last of these three statements should instead be "Christ has come again." As Peter said, we have all received the Holy Spirit, one of the three forms or persons of the Trinity. As Anglicans, most of us believe in the Real presence of Christ at the Eucharist – that Christ is present with us at the Communion table. If that is so, it is hard for me to argue that the eternal Christ is not already with us in this world, imploring us to make the Kingdom of God, not just near, but reality.