

Morningside

Pentecost

04/06/2017

Acts 2:13: They are filled with new wine.

This morning I will preach on a subject about which I know nothing – not for the first time you might say! – the effects of heavy drinking. I am intrigued that the impression which the first disciples gave to those who saw them on the first Pentecost was that they were drunk. What is it about drunk people which made the onlookers make that mistake?

It might be that they were together. The story in the Bible begins with those very words: “They were all together in one place”. It would not be clever to put too much into that word: at the opening of the story all that it means is that everyone was there. But it might be that by the end of the Pentecost experience they were “together” in a rather more profound sense.

They had been there, and they had been there together. How often have you seen that same sense of togetherness at the West End on a Friday night? Is that not one of the marks of people who have been drinking: they throw their arms round each other and pledge eternal friendship? So was that what confused the onlookers on the Day of Pentecost and made them think that the disciples had been drinking? Was it their sense of togetherness? You would like to think that that has been a sign of the church right from the very start. A sense of belonging to each other, of commitment to each other: a sense of a church together.

You might experience something of that in these days in this congregation. Maybe because of a sense of shared pride in your minister, now our Moderator. Or maybe just because your minister is not here and we are having to get on with things without him. Someone said to me last week, “I did not realise what an adjustment it would be when Derek is not here”. All of that might lead to a sense of common purpose, of shared achievement, of new relationships. A sense of belonging to each other, of commitment to each other: a sense of a church together.

It might be that what started the observers on the first Pentecost down the wrong track of thinking that they Christians had been drinking was

that they had become talkative. How often have you seen that in the West End on a Friday night? Those who won't give their neighbours the time of day find themselves engaging in telling the most elaborate, the most personal, the most ridiculous stories. And suddenly these Galileans in Jerusalem are bursting out, the verbal floodgates open, the torrent of words pouring forth. Suddenly the mice are roaring, the quiet ones have found their tongues. Could this be the reason that the onlookers thought they had been drinking?

It is their talkativeness which provides the most curious feature of the story. Jerusalem is filled with visitors, and they all claim to hear the followers of Jesus speaking in their own languages. Two hundred years ago John Wesley pointed out that the miracle which the Bible wants us to see is not that the visitors heard in their own languages; but that the disciples were speaking in different tongues. That is such an important difference. The church always gets huffy and bad-tempered because the world does not understand what we say and does not listen. But the Pentecost experience is that God wants the church to speak in ways that the whole world will understand and hear. It is not the fault of the world that our words do not make sense: we need to learn to speak in a way which makes sense to those who have never learned the language we have been using.

Did they think they were drunk because they were together? Or because they were talkative? Let me suggest something else. Maybe it was because they were dramatic. How often have you seen that at the West End on a Friday night. Drunk people can be very dramatic. An unexpected chorus of "I belong to Glasgow"; or a fight breaking out of a harmless conversation; or an impromptu eightsome reel in the middle of the road. There is a spontaneous, unpredictable, dramatic quality about the behaviour of people who have been drinking.

And the Bible story of the Book of Acts emphasises the drama of the story. That strange business at the very beginning: *Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.* It is certainly not ordinary. Puzzling, mysterious, but very dramatic.

It could hardly be further from the life of the Church of Scotland. Whatever the verdict on the recent General Assembly no-one in their right minds would suspect that the members were drunk! Our worship, our meetings, our programmes may be worthy or dignified or helpful or healing: but no-one in their right mind would make the mistake of thinking that those attending the General Assembly had been drinking! The very dullness of the life of Christians has caused groups to return to this passage over the centuries and try to imitate the exciting, dramatic experiences it describes. These Pentecostal churches are the fastest growing churches in the world today.

It is difficult to argue in favour of dullness, though I once heard it stated that "the purpose of sermons was to train people to cope with the boredom of life"! But I think we are on the wrong track if we seek explanations of the perception of drunkenness in the dramatic worship of the first Pentecost. After all, the wind and fire actually took place behind closed doors; and these exciting manifestations did not become a regular part of the worship of the early Christians. No, if we are looking for something that is dramatic, we would be much nearer the mark if we paid more attention to the changed lives, the changed attitudes, the changed behaviour, the changed convictions of these disciples. Those changes were dramatic indeed; and we would do well to reflect upon them. Maybe it is in our bad tempers and our rudeness and in our coldness that there could be changes so dramatic, improvements so stunning, that people would sit up and take notice and wonder if we had been drinking.

Why did they think that the disciples had been drinking? Together, talkative, dramatic or ..... dreaming? The world of the drunk can be a world of dreams. Fantasies, hopes, visions. I'm not so much thinking of purple elephants when I say visions. I'm thinking more of dreams of family hurts healed and missed opportunities restored and inadequacies overcome and lasting joy. It is one of the most engaging features of people who have been drinking: the world is by no means limited by what has always been.

So was that what encouraged the bystanders to make the mistake they made? Was it do with dreams and visions? At last! I've no doubt that was what was going on, no doubt at all that it was the dreamy quality of what they were saying which became confused with being drunk. I am so

confident because that it exactly the explanation which their spokesman Peter gave in the first Christian sermon. As soon as the accusation of drunkenness is made, Peter replies

*These are not drunk, as you suppose. .... No, this is what was spoken of by the prophet Joel: In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams.*

What is the mark of the presence of the Spirit of God? Seeing visions and dreaming dreams. On this Pentecost begin where the disciples began on the first Pentecost: with the Spirit of God and the dreaming of dreams and the seeing of visions.

Christian people of Morningside, on this great Sunday will you dream with me? Will you dream as did those first Christians on the first day of Pentecost. Dream of God. Dream of God and the church as she might be. Dream of a church that is the church and that cares for the least and the last and the lost.

Dream of God and of the whole world. Dream of God's perfect kingdom where no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness; and no strength known but the strength of love; where all peoples may find their security not in force of arms but in the perfect love that casts out fear.

On this Feast of the coming of the Spirit of God dream for yourself. No matter who you are, no matter what you have done, dream of God and yourself. Dream that it may be true and that it will be true, dream that it is true for you yourself, that the son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.

Amen